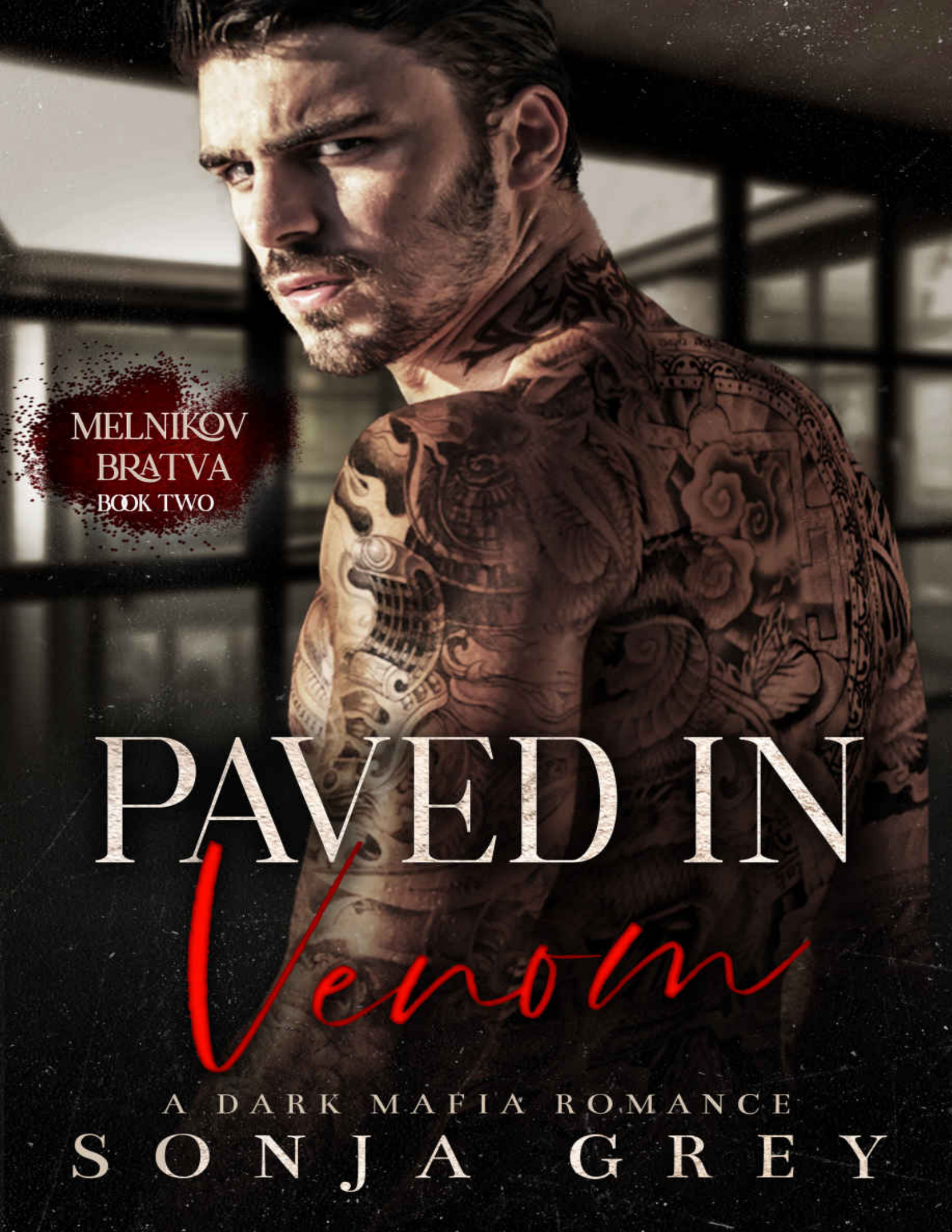
MELNIKOV
BRATVA
BOOK TWO
PAVED IN
Venom
A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE
SONJA GREY

Paved in Venom

A Dark Mafia Romance

Melnikov Bratva

Book 2

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Contents

Newsletter Sign Up
Also by Sonja Grey
Blurb
Trigger Warning

Prologue
1. Danil
2. Simona
3. Danil
4. Simona
5. Danil
6. Simona
7. Danil
8. Simona
9. Danil
10. Simona
11. Danil
12. Simona
13. Danil
14. Simona
Epilogue

Thank You!
Paved in Blood
Delicious Prey
Devil from Moscow
Bratva Devil
Filthy Devil
Caught by the Bratva Boss
Savage Savior
Arrogant Bratva Bastard
Grumpy Bratva Hitman
Russian Boxing Club Series
About the Author

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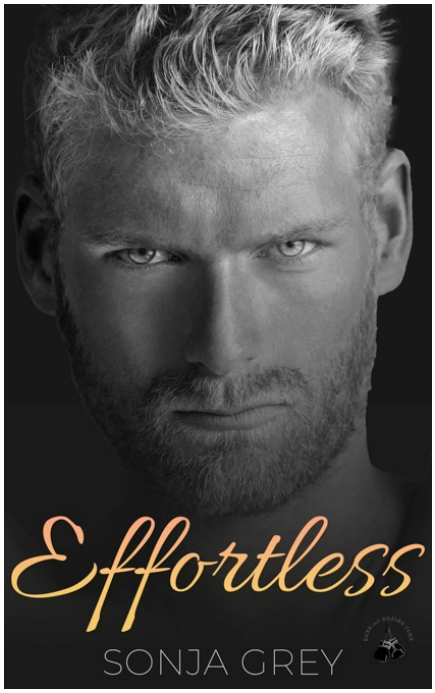

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All series are interconnected, unless noted, and can be read as stand-alones, but they're more enjoyable if you read them in order.

All are in KU!

Russian Boxing Club

My Russian Obsession

My Russian Temptation

My Russian Salvation

Stand-Alones

Grumpy Bratva Hitman

Delicious Prey

Fedorov Bratva

Caught by the Bratva Boss

Savage Savior

Arrogant Bratva Bastard

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Medvedev Bratva

Devil from Moscow

Bratva Devil

Filthy Devil

Melnikov Bratva

(Should be read in order)

Paved in Blood

Paved in Venom

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Blurb

First, I was taken,
then I was sold,
and now I’m his.

Simona:
The man who bought me is sinfully gorgeous—a tatted-up wall of muscle who assures me that I’m safe with him.
But he can’t let me go.
Not yet anyway.
He and his brothers need my help to find someone.
I agree to help them, not having any idea it’s going to lead us into a nest of vipers.
If their venom doesn’t get me….his will.
Lines blur between the two of us,
And I no longer feel like it’s all for show.
Because the truth is, Danil owns me…every single part of me.
Turns out being owned by the Bratva boss isn’t such a bad thing after all.

Danil:
The second I saw her, I knew I had to have her.
I would’ve paid anything to make her mine.
It was supposed to be fake.
I wasn’t supposed to fall for her,
But the second I won the bid, I knew I’d never be able to let her go.

I’m a man who likes to be in control, and Simona gives it all up for me.
She bends to my will, taking everything I want to give her.
Turns out I want to give her everything.

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Trigger Warning

This book contains all the elements you would expect from a dark mafia romance.

This is not a fade-to-black book…like at all. Expect dark, on-page content. This book is not recommended for sensitive readers.

This story does contain physical violence and sexual assault against the FMC (not by the MMC!) as well as graphic violence, explicit sex scenes, including anal, breath play, spanking as punishment, and mature language.

Sex trafficking plays a big part in this entire series.

The men I write are fiercely loyal and protective. They will kill anyone (seriously, anyone!) who dares to hurt the women they love, but they're big softies for their women. They tend to fall hard and fast, and there will never be any cheating in my books!

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Prologue

Danil
17 years old

I follow the pair of tourists down the busy street, being careful to stay far enough behind so they won't see me. Not that it really matters. They're completely oblivious to their surroundings.

That's mistake number one.

Mistake number two is when they stop at an outdoor cafe, and the man puts his nice leather messenger bag on the back of his chair. What a fucking dumbass. He's practically begging me to steal it, so I give the moron what he wants.

Ducking my way through the crowd, I pass by his chair, hooking my finger under the strap and walking off with it right under their goddamn noses. It's almost too damn easy, but adrenaline still rushes through me, giving me the high I've come to crave. It's the same feeling I get right before I've hacked into a system. After hours of work, seeing it open up to me, spilling all its secrets—it's fucking exhilarating.

Turning the corner, I put the bag's strap across my chest, admiring the high quality of it. This will be perfect for storing my laptop. I hate leaving it at home, and now I won't have to. I'm still smiling about it when I enter my apartment building. Instead of going to my floor, I go up to the one above my apartment and knock on Roman's door. His younger sister opens it with a huge smile on her face.

"Hey, Alina," I tell her, laughing when I see her smile fade as she looks around me and sees the empty hall.

“Expecting someone else?” I tease her.

She blushes but doesn’t answer, just steps aside so I can come in. When she sees my bag, she reaches out to give it a pet.

“Wow, nice bag.”

“Thanks, I just stole it.”

She laughs as I shut the door.

“Want to see what’s inside it?”

Running after me, she follows me to the couch where we both sit. I’ve just opened the flap when Roman walks in.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Danil just stole this bag, and now we’re gonna look through it,” Alina says with a laugh.

Roman walks over for a better look. I pull out the man’s wallet, a gaudy souvenir T-shirt that only a tourist would wear, a guidebook, and a Russian phrasebook. I smile even bigger when I pull out the iPad. Alina goes through the man’s wallet while I quickly hack into the iPad. I scroll through his files, laughing when I see how much porn he has on it. I hold it up for Roman to see without his ten-year-old sister getting a peek.

Roman laughs and runs a hand through his hair before walking over to Alina. “Who is this guy?” he asks her.

She’s been learning English in school, but she struggles with the name. Roman leans closer and reads, “Adam Thompson.” He sees all the money she pulls out and laughs. “Thanks for the groceries, Adam.” He counts it out and looks over at me. “This is enough for all of us to eat for like two weeks.”

I’ve been stealing us money online, but it’s been fairly small amounts. I’m still working out how to do it like I want. One day I’m going to have an elaborate system that’ll be completely untraceable, and it’s going to have millions in it. We will never be poor again. But for now, we pay for most things like this, the old-fashioned way. We sure as hell can’t depend on our families to do it. My mom can barely pay the bills, and my stepdad is an abusive piece of shit. If I want regular meals, then I need to make it happen on my own.

There’s another knock at the door, and Alina bolts from the couch, running to it before they have time to knock again. I look at Roman. “Let me guess, it’s Matvey’s turn to stay here?”

He smiles and nods. “Yeah, she’s been waiting all damn day for him to show up.”

I look over when he walks in with Vitaly and Lev, Alina trailing closely behind. Ever since the fire that happened almost two years ago, Matvey’s been different. He’s quieter and no longer the carefree boy we all grew up with. He lost his mom and sister in that fire, and I know he blames himself for their deaths, for not getting to them in time. His dad was the cause of the fire, and he died that night, leaving Matvey without any family, so we all stepped up and became one. He rotates living at our apartments, and this week it’s Roman’s turn.

“Hey, what’s all this?” Vitaly asks, walking over to the loot we’ve laid out. He grabs the pile of cash. “Fucking nice, man.”

“Want me to grab some food?” Lev asks. His recently pierced eyebrow still looks like it’s painful, but he doesn’t seem to care. Pain has never bothered Lev. I swear he even enjoys it.

“Hell yeah,” Vitaly says with a laugh. “Let’s hit McDonald’s. I want a cheeseburger, and that really hot girl works there.”

Vitaly’s been trying to get a date with her for a few weeks now. We have a running bet going on. She’s two years older than us, and Matvey and I don’t think he has a chance in hell, but Roman and Lev think it’s going to happen.

They write down what we all want, and I catch Alina watching Matvey to see if he’s going with them. When he comes in and sits down in the chair in the corner, she visibly relaxes. Her crush on him has yet to fade away, not even after the fire when he would barely speak a word to any of us. She kept sneaking out and going to the hospital. The first time it happened, Roman nearly lost his mind. We ran all over looking for her until we finally found her sitting on the edge of Matvey’s hospital bed, reading him a story while he laid there in so much pain he could barely move.

Roman tried to keep her home, but she wasn’t having it, and he finally just gave up. Matvey didn’t seem to mind her company, and it was better than him having to be up there all by himself. We visited him as much as we were able to, but there were still times when none of us could be there, and that’s when Alina was more than happy to fill the gap.

After Lev and Vitaly leave to get the food, Alina watches Matvey dig around in his backpack. The hood of his sweatshirt is up, covering most of his face as he rummages through his stuff. He’s insecure about his scars, but

they’re slowly getting better. He’ll carry them for the rest of his life, though. When he holds up the small paperback book, Alina lets out a squeal and jumps up, running to him with a huge smile on her face.

“You found it!”

He gives her a small smile, which is way more than anyone else ever gets, before he puts it in her small hands. She hugs the book, and then surprises the hell out of all of us by throwing her arms around him. Since the fire, Matvey doesn’t like to be touched, and I can see his body visibly tense when she throws her arms around him. At first, touch was excruciating for him, he couldn’t stand to have even a thin sheet on his body, but then things switched and it began to hurt him more emotionally than physically. His dark eyes meet mine, and I know he doesn’t want to hurt her feelings by pulling away, so he doesn’t. He returns the hug and pats her back, and when she pulls away, I see the look on her face. Even though what she feels for him is a little girl’s crush, she’s completely smitten. I doubt she’ll ever look at anyone else like she looks at him.

“Thanks, Matvey,” she says before sitting down on the floor next to his chair and opening the book he bought her.

“You’re welcome,” he says in the voice that’s now gravelly from the smoke inhalation he’d endured. If Vitaly hadn’t heard his screams from his own apartment, Matvey would’ve died that night along with the rest of his family.

Roman and I mess around with my new iPad until the others get back, and as soon as they stroll in and I see Vitaly’s smug grin, I know that Matvey and I have lost the bet. He holds up the receipt with her phone number written on it.

Vitaly points his finger at us. “You two assholes lose. You should’ve never doubted the strong pull I have with the ladies. They can’t resist me. I tried to tell you, but you wouldn’t listen.”

Roman and Lev laugh and start digging through the bags of food. While Matvey and I wait for what’s to come, Vitaly smiles and looks between the two of us.

“Okay, I’m feeling generous tonight. You two lost, and I’m sure it’s a mistake you’ll never make again and that you’re both sorry for doubting me.”

I roll my eyes at Matvey, who looks less than thrilled at Vitaly’s *I’m so generous* speech.

Vitaly continues, “So all you have to do is admit the truth.”

We both look at him, waiting.

“Just admit that I’m the sex god of the group.” He wiggles his fingers, like he’s beckoning forth the praise from our lips. I snort out a laugh while Matvey shakes his head.

“I take offense to this,” Lev says from the couch. “Just for the record, I do not believe that Vitaly is the sex god of our group.”

Alina laughs and raises the book to cover her embarrassed face.

“Come on,” Vitaly says with a huge grin. “Just tell the truth. That’s all I’m asking.” When we’re still silent, he says, “And you did give your word that you’d pay the price if you lost the bet.”

He knows he’s got us. We did give our word, and between the five of us, that’s a solemn vow that none of us takes lightly. I look at Vitaly and swallow my pride.

“You are the sex god of the group, Vitaly. I’m sure they’ll write legends about your conquests one day.”

Vitaly’s laughing so hard his eyes are watering. “Your turn, Matvey.”

Matvey groans, but says in his raspy voice, “Vitaly is the sex god of the group. I’m sure women will come from far and wide for the chance to kneel at your feet.”

“And while they’re kneeling,” he starts to say, but Roman cuts him off by throwing a fry at him.

“My little sister’s here, man.”

Vitaly laughs and eats the fry. “Sorry, Alina.”

Alina laughs and grabs the cheeseburger he offers her. We eat and joke around for another couple of hours until I can’t put off going home any longer. I pack up my new bag and tell Roman I’ll be back tomorrow. Lev walks out with me. We both live one floor down, so we take the stairs together since the elevator never works in this shit building. I can hear my mom and her newest husband fighting from the hallway.

“You want to stay with me tonight?” Lev asks. “I mean, my place isn’t much better, but at least my parents aren’t screaming at each other.” He lets out a laugh. “At least not yet anyway.”

“No, I’ll be fine,” I tell him. “See you tomorrow, man.”

“See ya,” he says, unlocking his door and slipping inside.

I unlock mine and brace myself for what’s about to happen. Stepping in, I see the all-too-familiar sight. My stepdad is drunk, again, and he and my

mom are in the middle of a screaming match. They barely notice my arrival. I drop my bag off in my room and sit on the edge of my bed. They keep screaming, and when I hear a sharp smack combined with my mom's yelp of pain, I let out a sigh and stand back up.

I walk into the living room and face my stepdad. He's not a small man, and right now the alcohol is running strong through his veins and he's in a rage. I have just enough time to think that this is going to hurt like a motherfucker before his fist hits my face. My mom screams while I yell at her to lock herself in her bedroom. Blood pools in my mouth as I turn to face my stepdad. I manage to get a few punches in thanks to Lev. He's been teaching me how to fight, and I've gotten pretty damn good, but there's only so much I can do against a grown-ass man who's twice my size.

Eventually I fall to the floor and hope I pass out soon. The punches and kicks come quickly, too fast for me to protect myself. I count them, focusing on the numbers instead of the pain.

One, two, three, four, five…

It's never ending, but right before I finally lose consciousness, I make a promise to myself. I will never be the man on the floor ever again. No matter what it takes, I'm going to be the fucker still standing. I'm going to be the one raining down the kicks and punches. This will be the last goddamn time I ever get my ass kicked.

And it was.

From that day forward, I made damn sure to always be the one holding the power. Over the next few years, my brothers and I built something big, and now we're the dangerous men on top. We're the ones everyone else fears, and we're determined to keep it that way. The Melnikov Bratva rules with an iron fist, and we make no apologies for our brutal ways. We will kill anyone who tries to go against us, and we will do whatever needs to be done to keep our family safe. End of story.

We are brothers by choice.

Brothers in blood, in life, and in death.

The path that's lead us here is one that's paved in blood, and it's about to be paved in venom, because we're about to walk into the goddamn viper's nest.

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Chapter 1

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Danil

I pull into the parking lot and cut the engine with a sigh. The building in front of me has come a long way. When the Barinov Bratva was in charge, Pink was your stereotypical strip club—very little class with a perpetual sleazy, rundown feel to the place. That feeling would cling to you after you left for the night, making you wish for a shower.

That sort of depressing atmosphere is not what my brothers and I need. We need a club that will bring in dirty politicians. We need a nice-looking trap that will allow us to infiltrate and dismantle the most lucrative sex trafficking ring in operation. We need a way in, and the classy club in front of me is our ticket.

Ever since my brother, Vitaly, took over, he's made it his mission to give this place a facelift. If anyone can do it, he can. Gone are the huge, neon, blinking tits that used to hang from the building, and in its place is a hot pink, tasteful, lit-up sign that reads *Pink* in a pretty font. It's simple, discreet, and classy. The goal has always been to make it a club that someone in a position of power would feel comfortable walking into. Yes, it has half-naked women and back rooms where anything goes, but it looks classy, damn it, and that's really all that matters to these bastards. Appearance is everything.

Grabbing my messenger bag, I get out of my car and sling it across my chest. The worn, buttery-soft leather practically molds to my body at this point. I've had it since I was seventeen, and I take it everywhere I go. I can't be away from my laptop. It makes me antsy and irritable, so the messenger bag is just a given at this point. Even with the constant reminder that my computer is within arm's reach, my mind refuses to be quiet. It's

loud inside my head, way too fucking loud, and over the years I've learned that counting will sometimes quiet things, at least enough for me to stay sane, or thereabouts, so I start counting the cars in the parking lot.

Rolling the tension from my shoulders, I take in a deep breath, hoping that will kill the headache that's threatening to bloom. I spent most of last night on the dark web, scouring through photos that I wish I could scrub from my mind. I wish I could erase a lot of the things I've seen over the last year. I push the thoughts aside and head to the front door. The club hasn't officially re-opened yet, so there isn't a bouncer out front, and when I step inside, I'm met with a flurry of activity. Several women are making use of the three stages, practicing routines on the poles and familiarizing themselves with everything, and when I look up at the brand-new VIP level, I can see two of my brothers in one of the booths. Lev and Matvey are deep in conversation about something, and when they see me, Lev waves his hand in greeting.

"Bring us up some drinks," he hollers down at me.

I give them a wave and then walk over to the closest bar while I count tables along the way. Mila gives me a big smile, already reaching for a bottle of vodka. She's the wife of Timofey, one of our higher-level enforcers, and I can already tell she's going to be worth her weight in gold. She used to bartend at one of the most popular clubs in Moscow, so she has the experience to handle this, and she's attractive. Her long legs, blonde hair, and green eyes are going to keep the customers coming back for more. Timofey hadn't been thrilled when we'd hired her, but we all gave him our word that no harm would come to her. She'll be safely behind the bar, not out mingling with the clientele.

"Thanks, Mila," I tell her in Russian, grabbing the bottle and the glasses she sets out. "How's everything looking?"

She goes back to lining up liquor bottles how she wants them while she says over her shoulder, "It's looking good, I think. I've just about got this place how I want it, and the two women Vitaly hired to help me seem like they'll be a good fit."

Laughing, she holds her hands out, miming a pair of huge breasts. "They'll keep the men happy."

I laugh at her impersonation, but I know she's right. These men want something to stare at, and we're going to give it to them. Everyone we've hired is Russian. The girls have been instructed to speak as little English as

possible and to report back to us if they hear anything suspicious. They're our spies, and the club will be full of them.

Telling Mila bye, I bring the bottle and glasses up to my brothers. I count each of the sixteen stairs on the way up. The VIP section is on the second level, and it circles around the entire club. The men can see the stages from up here, but Vitaly's also put in a few stripper poles, seven that are visible from where I'm standing, so we can have dancers up here as well. He's also employed a chef and had an entire kitchen built onto the place. Steak and tits—it's a winning combination. Men are so goddamn predictable.

I set the glasses down and start pouring us each a shot. Lev takes it with a grin, his lip ring glinting in the light when he tosses his drink back. Matvey takes his with a nod, his face hidden in shadow beneath the black hood of his sweatshirt. I down my own drink before pouring us all another and taking a seat.

"So what's going on?" I ask them.

Lev smiles and lets out a soft laugh. "We're trying to decide when Vitaly's finally going to lose his shit and kill Oleg. He's been following Vitaly around for the last hour, asking him questions, flirting with the dancers. It's driving him crazy, but he knows he can't kill him yet." He pours himself another drink. "I think he's going to snap, though. It's only a matter of time."

I laugh at the image. Oleg Barinov and his brothers, Alexei and Ivan, run the Barinov Bratva and technically own this club. We came to America, believing the rumors that their Bratva ran a large part of this city, but when we got here, we found three brothers who couldn't even speak Russian, running a shitty strip club while claiming to be something they most definitely were not. It's working to our advantage, though. We convinced them we wanted to help, nice guys that we are, and that we were going to make them a lot of money and earn them some respect. The truth is we're using them, keeping their names on the business in case it all goes to shit, and once we no longer need them, it'll be three quick bullets to the head for these fuckers.

We watch as Vitaly storms out from the back followed by an eager Oleg at his heels. I can read my brother like a book. He's in his *I'm seconds away from completely losing my shit* phase. We all three pour another shot and sit back to watch the show.

“Jesus fucking Christ I’m going to put a bullet in this stupid fucker’s face,” he yells in Russian. When he hears us laugh, he looks up and points a finger at us. “Laugh it up, fuckers, I’m sending him up there to hang out with you.”

Oleg, clueless to everything that’s just been said, looks up at us and gives us a wave. “Club’s looking good, right?”

“Sure is, Oleg,” I say, lifting my glass in a toast. “You and your brothers have done a great job.”

Vitaly glares at me, knowing I’m pushing all his buttons. Oleg hasn’t done shit for this club. This is all Vitaly’s doing, and we all know it. Well, everyone knows it except for the dumbass at his heels.

“He’s gonna kick your ass, man,” Lev mutters next to me.

I finish my drink and smile. “Let him fucking try.”

My brothers and I are brothers by choice, a family because we chose to become one. We grew up together in Moscow, our own families not worth hanging onto, and it’s a decision I’ve never regretted.

Brothers in blood, in life, and in death.

They’re everything to me, and I’d take a bullet for them without a second thought. That doesn’t mean I don’t like to irritate the hell out of them on occasion, though. Vitaly’s still scowling at me when he switches to English and tells Oleg, “Why don’t you go have a drink with my brothers? I’m sure they’d love to hear all the amazing improvements you’ve made to the club.”

Matvey groans and shoots me a look. “Nice job. Now we’re stuck with the dumbass.”

I smile at his grouchy face and stand up. “No,” I correct him, “you guys are stuck with him.”

“Don’t you dare leave and bury your head in that fucking computer,” he says, and I try not to laugh at how pissed he looks.

My smile grows right as Oleg appears. “Too late,” I tell him in Russian. Switching to English, I clap Oleg on the back like we’re old friends. “Sorry, Oleg, I need to go and get some work done, but Matvey and Lev would love to hang out with you for a bit.”

“We’re going to make him pay for this, right?” Lev asks Matvey in Russian.

“Damn straight we are.”

I give them both a big smile and leave the VIP section. I find Vitaly talking to a group of strippers. I quickly count twelve heads. Manwhore is the word we often use to describe Vitaly, but he's actually been professional with all of our dancers. He hasn't fucked a single one of them, and we're all baffled by it, himself included.

"Has everyone seen the schedule for opening week?" he asks them, speaking in Russian since they all understand it.

When the girls nod, he flips through some paperwork and scratches at the stubble on his cheek. "Don't forget, they're not allowed to touch you unless you allow it. If you decide to go to one of the back rooms to give a lap dance, then that's your decision. If you decide to do more, again, that's your decision. Keep the money. I don't want to see it. If any of the men try and force you to do something or if they get too rough, tell someone immediately. Come find me or one of my brothers or get one of the bouncers. That kind of thing will not be allowed here."

Vitaly spots me leaning against the wall behind him and gives me a quick nod to let me know he's almost done. He's already forgotten that he was pissed at me a few minutes ago. That's how it's always been between the five of us. None of us can stay mad for long. I have no doubt that Lev and Matvey will give me hell for leaving them with Oleg, but it's all in fun.

"Tell me or one of my brothers if you hear anything about women coming in," Vitaly continues. "I want to know anything that sounds like it might be about sex trafficking or anything that might be connected to the Red Viper."

The women keep their eyes on my brother and nod. They're not stupid. They're all familiar with trafficking, and I have no doubt they'll tell us anything they hear. It's the reason we're doing all of this. When Vitaly is done with his speech, he tells the dancers they can go home, and then he turns his attention to me.

"Fuck me, man. I'm ready for this grand opening to be over with."

"The place is looking good," I tell him, eyeing the strategically placed stripper poles so men can eat while getting an up-close-and-personal view of the dancers.

"Well, it sure as hell looks a lot better than the dump it was. You should see the dressing room I set the girls up with. It's fucking huge, and I even got a few hot tubs back there so they can rest their sore muscles after a night of dancing."

I laugh and raise a brow at him. “You sure you aren’t fucking any of them?”

“I know, I can hardly believe it myself. I’ve resisted the urge so far. They’re too much a part of all this shit,” he says, waving his hand at the area around us, and I know exactly what he means. “We’re paying them, so it’d make me feel like a jackass to fuck them, too.”

He holds up a hand before I can say anything.

“Yeah, I know. I’m usually a jackass, but this is different.”

I laugh and nod. “I know what you mean.”

He gives me a smile. “Besides, it’s not like it’s hard to just go to another club and pick up a piece of ass.”

“Ah, there’s the manwhore brother I know and love.”

“Yeah, like you’re a fucking monk. I saw you leave that club we were at a few weeks ago with a blonde. What was her name?”

“Jackass,” I mutter with a laugh. He knows damn good and well I didn’t get her name, nor do I care to know it. I do know I was so bored I started counting thrusts. She was a quick fuck, just like all the others. No attachments, no expectations, nothing except a much-needed release, and then I walk away. That’s how I like it. I don’t have the time or desire for anything else.

Vitaly looks at the upper level and groans. “I can’t believe you left Oleg up there with them. They’re going to kill the bastard.”

“One day,” I agree with him, “but not today.”

I give my brothers a wave, laughing when Lev flips me the bird. Turning back to Vitaly, I say, “See you back at the house. I need to get some more work done.”

“I need to do a few more things here, and then I’ll be leaving too.” He turns toward the hallway that leads to his office while he looks over his shoulder at me. “Order pizza, man. I’m fucking starving.”

“Will do,” I tell him, already making my way through the main area and towards the front door. When I’ve almost reached it, I hear footsteps coming up behind me. My hand reaches for the gun I have holstered under my suit jacket before I’ve even made the conscious decision to do so.

My fingers are just touching metal when I hear a feminine voice say, “Danil, wait up.”

Fuck, I know that voice. I drop my hand and turn to face Galina. The short blonde looks up at me with wide, excited eyes. She’s in a tiny pair of

shorts and a T-shirt that looks three sizes too small. It's barely covering her tits, and when she takes a step closer, I bite back the irritated groan that wants to escape. Galina set her sights on me right after she was hired and she saw me walking out of Vitaly's office one day. She's a pretty girl, but I'm not even remotely interested. Galina wants me to fuck her, but that's not all she wants. I can see it in her big, dark eyes. She wants date nights and long conversations where we bare our souls. She wants romance and love, and there's no way in fuck she's getting it from me.

"I've got to get some work done," I tell her, already turning to leave.

"Don't you ever take breaks?" she asks. Her accent is thick, but her English is very good.

"Not really."

She gives me a big smile and reaches out to touch the strap of my bag. "What do you always carry around with you?"

I grab her wrist and push her hand away, because now she's just pissing me off. I don't like people messing around with my shit, and I really don't like anyone coming close to touching my computer.

"That's my business, Galina. Get back to work. We open in a couple of weeks."

Her face falls at the hard tone of my voice, but there's no point in leading the poor girl on. Nothing is ever going to happen between us. The faster she learns that, the better. I turn and leave before she can say anything else. The drive back to the penthouse that my brothers and I share doesn't take long, and when I pull into my reserved spot in the underground garage, the headache that's been threatening to bloom hits me full force.

With a groan, I grab my bag and walk over to the private elevator. After the ride up, the doors open onto the main area, and the first thing I see is a long line of framed photos, fifteen in total. Ever since Roman married Emily, things have been a little different around here. The photos are a perfect example. Most of them are from their wedding. They'd said their vows at the penthouse, right out on the rooftop terrace, and all our smiling faces greet me as I step off the elevator.

It's a nice change. A little over a year ago, Roman's sister was taken by sex traffickers, and we've put all our focus on finding her. She never did outgrow her crush on Matvey, and once she turned eighteen, that crush was finally starting to develop into something more between them, but then she just disappeared. It nearly destroyed all of us. Finding Alina is at the

forefront of everything we do, and we will find her, but it's nice to have moments where we can laugh and enjoy life. Emily has helped us remember that.

When I walk into the kitchen to find her pulling out a tray of cupcakes, my mouth immediately starts to water.

"I'm so happy you married Roman."

She laughs and gives me a big smile while she sets the tin down to cool off. Roman walks in and wraps his arms around her, leaning down to kiss her while I grab a bottle of water from the fridge. His hand rests possessively on her lower stomach. I know he can't wait for her pregnancy to start showing, but she's still in her first trimester and has a long way to go. This baby has given us all a sense of hope, but it's also given us a deadline. We all want Alina here for the birth, and we've all been working like crazy to make it happen.

Grabbing my phone from my bag, I pull up the local pizza place we always use. "Do you guys want pizza? Vitaly wants me to place an order."

"Are they still at Pink?" Roman asks.

I laugh. "Yeah, I left them with Oleg."

"I'm guessing they were thrilled," he says while Emily laughs.

"They're going to get you back for that," she warns.

"It was worth it." I lean against the counter, waiting for her to ice the cupcakes. "So do you guys want pizza?"

Roman looks down at Emily, and when she nods her head, he says, "Sure, we'll take some."

I place a large order, making sure to get Vitaly the cheesy bread he likes so much and Matvey the cinnamon sticks he always devours, and while we wait for it to arrive, Emily hands me a spatula and puts me to work. I help her ice the cupcakes, ignoring the guilty feeling that always starts to hit me when I've spent too long away from my computer. If I'm not searching for Alina, then I feel guilty for not searching for her. I know it's ridiculous and that no one can survive for long with that amount of stress hanging over them, but the feeling hits me all the same, not even counting is helping.

My fingers tap an agitated rhythm on the counter after I've iced the last one, and when Roman and Emily both lift a brow at me, I let out a sigh and say, "What?"

"You need to take a break from all this," Roman tells me. It's not the first time we've had this conversation. I know he feels bad that Alina's

disappearance has taking such a toll on all of us, but we've never once blamed him. We all love Alina and want to bring her back home.

"I will later. I'm talking to David tomorrow night about the auction that's coming up. I'm getting an invite to the damn thing. After the auction, I'll take a couple days off," I tell him.

I know he wants to argue with me about it, so I turn to Emily and ask, "How's the morning sickness?"

The look on his face makes it obvious he knows exactly what I'm doing, but he lets it go and instead wraps an arm around his wife and kisses the top of her head. I've never seen Roman in love before, but from the first night he met Emily, that was it. It didn't matter that he met her because we were investigating her dad's involvement in sex trafficking, and it didn't matter when he turned out to be guilty as fuck. She's not responsible for her dad's decisions. She wants to take them all down just as much as we do. I'm happy for them. Not everyone gets a happy ending like this, and if anyone deserves it, it's him.

Emily groans and hands me one of the finished cupcakes. "Sick as a dog every damn morning. That's why I'm baking cupcakes. I had a craving, and I know that once I go to bed I won't be able to stomach anything until tomorrow afternoon."

"I'm sorry, *solnishka*," Roman says, turning her around and lifting her onto the counter. She laughs and wraps her arms and legs around him. "You can eat your weight in pizza tonight and have cupcakes for dessert."

"Yeah, tomorrow morning is going to be a lot of fun," she says with another groan.

"I'll hold your hair, baby," Roman tells her, making her laugh again.

I take my cupcake and leave. I'm not about to stand around and watch them make out like a couple of teenagers. The penthouse we share is huge, plenty of space for all of us, but there's only one kitchen, so it's inevitable that we're going to run into one another a lot. So far it's worked out fine, though, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't excited about having a baby around. We all are.

Stuffing the last bit of cupcake in my mouth, I go downstairs to the space I've claimed as my own. Matvey's rooms are down here too, and there's also a room we set up with a pool table and bar. There's even a few gaming systems for when we want to zone out or can't sleep. This place has everything we could want or need.

Grabbing my laptop from my messenger bag, I put it on my desk next to my other equipment. I have several large monitors set up, and as soon as I sit my ass in my leather chair, I feel some of the tension leave me. My headache dulls to a mild throb when my fingers hit the keyboard. Computers make sense to me; they always have. Ever since I stole my very first one when I was a teenager, I've been hooked. It's the only thing that's ever really made sense to me. I remember how surprised I was when I'd show the others the things I was doing, and they'd just look at me like I was crazy. They couldn't see what I saw. To them it was a mess, an indecipherable code that they couldn't understand no matter how hard they tried. To me it was beautiful, and it made perfect sense.

The first thing I do is check our banking accounts, making sure everything looks okay and that money is still being funneled into our accounts with no red flags showing up. I've been syphoning us money from various accounts since we were teenagers, and now we have more than we'll ever be able to spend. I keep taking more, though. Old habits die hard.

Before I can get too deep in my research, I get a text that the pizza is here. I'm not surprised to find the kitchen empty and the cupcakes forgotten. Roman and Emily will eventually crawl out of their bedroom for food. I meet the delivery driver in the parking garage, giving him a large tip because I may steal money, but I'm pretty damn generous with it. The guy's eyes light up when he sees the hundred I slip him.

"Wow, thanks, man," he says, pocketing it with a quickness.

I take the boxes and get back into the elevator. I know exactly what it feels like to be poor, to want things you'll never be able to afford, and to go to bed hungry because there's nothing in the fucking apartment to eat. I also know what it feels like to get your ass kicked by an abusive stepdad. The only good thing about my youth are my brothers. Everything else was shit.

Dropping the boxes off on the counter, I fix myself a plate and go back to my room. I have no doubt tonight will be another long night of digging through things on the hidden dark web that I have no desire to see. The images I've had to comb through will haunt me for the rest of my life, but there's no way around it. Someone knows where Alina is. These bastards keep photos, they share them, orchestrate auctions and sometimes even set up trades when they're ready for something new. If there are photos of Alina, then I'm going to find them.

After several hours of poking around the slimiest corners of the internet, a gut-wrenching scream pulls me away from the screen. I run out of my room and down the hall to Matvey's room. His night terrors had gotten better, but they've recently taken a turn for the worse. Throwing open his door, I run in, stopping at the edge of his bed. He's fisting the sheet, his face a mask of pure agony, and his shirt's so sweaty it's clinging to him. I know better than to touch him. I learned that lesson years ago. It had taken both Roman and Vitaly to peel him off me that night. I'd nearly lost consciousness because I couldn't bring myself to fight back and risk hurting him. After that night, we developed a system. I reach for the glass of water he makes sure to always have on his nightstand and toss it right in his face.

His arms flail as he screams Alina's name before finally opening his eyes. They're wide with fear and confusion, and when they settle on me, his shoulders slump, and he lets out a heavy sigh. He scrubs a hand over his wet face and angrily tosses his pillow aside.

"Thanks, Danil," he says, his voice even raspier than usual. "Sorry to wake you again."

"Fuck that," I say, setting the empty glass down. "You know I'm always awake."

Matvey sits on the edge of his bed, elbows resting on his thighs with his head in his hands. I sit down next to him, not wanting to leave him alone just yet. We sit in silence for several minutes. I know he's in pain. I know he carries it around every second of every day—guilt for not being able to save his mom and sister in the fire, guilt for Alina being kidnapped, guilt for not having found her yet. It's tearing him apart, piece by piece, day by day, it's destroying him, and there's not a goddamn thing any of us can do to stop it.

"We're going to find her," I tell him. "I'm getting an invite to that auction, and I'm going to find out who's behind this. Once we have a name, we can track them down and find out where she is."

His hands are in tight fists, tattoos and scars covering them and disappearing under the sleeves of his shirt. "I keep thinking about what's being done to her." Keeping his head in his hands, he lets out a pained sigh. "Right fucking now, what's being done to her? What are they doing to her?" He lifts his head, his dark eyes meet mine, and the tortured look in them makes me more determined than ever to find her. "I can't do a goddamn thing about it. I can't protect her."

“You will,” I tell him. I want to reach out and squeeze his shoulder, anything to make him feel even slightly better, but he doesn’t like to be touched, so instead I say, “We’re going to find her, and you’re going to get to kill the fucker who has her.”

He lets out a harsh laugh. “That thought is the only thing that keeps me going sometimes. When I dream about killing that fucker, it’s the only peaceful sleep I get.”

“Come on,” I tell him, standing up and motioning for him to follow. “I’ll let you kick my ass in a game of pool.”

“Let me?” he asks. A very brief hint of a smile crosses his face before it disappears. “You know there’s no way in hell you can beat me.”

We play pool until the sun starts to rise. He’s right. I don’t even come close to beating him. The guy’s a fucking wizard at pool. Before he disappears to do his morning workout, he gives me a rare smack on the back and says, “Thanks, man. It almost makes me feel bad about the payback headed your way for leaving me and Lev with Oleg.”

“What payback?” I ask as he walks out the door.

“You’ll see,” he calls over his shoulder.

There’s no telling what in the hell they have planned, so I don’t even bother trying to figure it out. My luck I’ll wake up with Lev trying to pierce my lip or some shit like that. I walk back to my room, and by the time I crawl into bed, the sun has already risen, and I’m past the point of exhaustion. I push a button for the blackout curtains to descend, welcoming the pitch-black darkness that fills the room. If I’m lucky, I’ll get several hours of sleep before I have to get ready for tonight.

When I wake, my brain is groggy, and it takes several seconds before I realize where I’m at and what time it is. Well, I got my wish, and if I don’t hurry, I’m going to be late. I jump in the shower, letting the hot water loosen my muscles and fully wake me up. After I’m dressed in a suit, I check to make sure I haven’t missed anything important on my computer before slipping it into my messenger bag and heading upstairs.

Vitaly is heating up a plate of leftover pizza when I walk into the kitchen. “You going to the Red Viper?”

“Yeah, and I’m not leaving until David gives me an invite.”

“I’ll come with you,” Lev says, walking in and grabbing a slice of pizza off Vitaly’s plate.

“Fucker,” Vitaly mutters with a laugh.

He takes a bite and heads back to his room to change while I grab a slice of pizza and take a large bite while Vitaly lifts a brow at me.

"You know there's more in the fridge, right?"

"But yours is already heated up." Before he can get angry, I say, "I ordered you extra cheesy bread last night."

"And that's the only reason I'm not punching you for stealing my food."

I laugh and take another bite. "Just be happy you don't have to go with me tonight."

"I'm more than happy to sit this one out," he says, grabbing a coke from the fridge. "That's one good thing about Pink. It's given me the perfect excuse to avoid that place."

None of us like having to go to the Red Viper, but it's unavoidable. The owners of the club are heavily involved in sex trafficking, and every girl who works there is a victim. We have to pretend that we enjoy being there and that we're interested in buying women. It's unpleasant to say the least.

Lev walks back out in a suit, and right as we're about to leave, my phone rings. I don't recognize the number, but I answer it anyway, and as soon as I hear Oleg's voice, I shoot Lev a look that has him laughing and saying *payback* in Russian.

"Hey, Danil," Oleg says in a voice that's way too fucking chipper. "Lev gave me your number last night, said you wouldn't mind. I was wondering if you wanted to grab a drink with me tonight. We could hang out at Pink and watch the dancers rehearse," he says like I don't have better things to do with my time, "or we could go to a different club. Whatever you want, man."

"Sorry, Oleg, I'm pretty busy tonight. I've got some business to take care of," I say while flipping Lev the bird as we walk to the elevator. Vitaly laughs and heads into the living room.

"Oh, well maybe I can help," Oleg says, making me roll my eyes because there's no way in fuck this dipshit could ever help me with anything.

"Yeah, not tonight, Oleg. Maybe some other night." I hang up before he can embarrass himself further and glare at Lev, who's leaning against the back of the elevator with a grin on his face.

"I did warn you," he says.

"I can't believe you fucking gave him my number."

“An hour,” he tells me with a laugh. “We had to sit there and listen to him talk for an entire fucking hour. I’ve never wanted to kill someone so badly in my life. I’m honestly surprised Matvey didn’t reach over the table and stab him to death.”

“He’s never going to stop calling me.”

“No, he won’t,” Lev agrees, laughing harder. “That’s the beauty of it. It’s a payback that never truly ends.”

“You are such an ass,” I tell him.

He laughs all the way to my car, and during the drive I keep hearing him bust out into soft giggles every time he thinks about it like a fucking schoolgirl.

The club is packed when we get there, just like it always is. The place looks like a rundown dump of a place in one of the worst parts of the city, but the parking lot is always full of expensive cars that never get broken into. Everyone knows this place isn’t to be messed with, and they give it a wide berth.

Lev’s finally gotten control of himself, and he and I walk to the front door, nodding at the bouncer who knows us well enough by now to just step aside with a nod, letting us into the dark, depressing club. The music is loud, the lighting low, and the place is filled with the vilest of men and the women who have no choice but to give them what they want, no matter what that may be. Usually I’d play David’s game, sit with him for hours while some random girl grinds in my lap and I count every fucking thing I can think of while pretending to be riveted by what he’s saying, but I can’t do it tonight. It’s time to get things moving, and I’m tired of fucking around.

We walk over to the VIP section, and when David sees us, he waves a hand at the tall brunette who gives me a wink before allowing us into the closed-off section. Aaron helps David run the club, and when the blonde in his lap gets down on her knees, he sees us and smiles.

“Hey, haven’t seen you two in a few days,” he says while the woman nuzzles her face in his crotch.

“I swear to god if he whips his dick out, I’m going to lose what little patience I have,” Lev mutters in Russian.

“We’ve been busy,” I tell Aaron in English, and then sit down, putting my focus on David. “We can’t stay long, but I wanted to come in to talk to you about the upcoming auction. I want in.”

David laughs and says, “Where’s Roman? Is he ever coming back in to see us?”

“He has other commitments at the moment,” I say.

“You mean his wife?” Aaron jokes. “What about his little pet? Who’s taking care of her?”

They have no idea that the woman Roman used to bring in here as his pet was actually Emily in a wig. I give a soft laugh and say, “His pet and his wife are doing fine.” I put my focus back on David as a leggy redhead walks over and climbs into Lev’s lap. He has no choice but to accept the lap dance she’s offering. Usually, a lap dance from a beautiful woman would be welcomed, but not here, not like this. When a blonde approaches, I wave her off. I have the excuse of business, and I’m damn well going to use it.

While the redhead moans and grinds even harder against my brother’s lap, I tell David, “I want an invite.”

He waves at the club around us. “You can have your pick of the women here, Danil. You know that.”

“I want my own,” I tell him. “I don’t want someone that belongs to you.” I lean closer and hold his gaze. “I want my own, and I want a virgin.”

He smiles and scrubs a hand over his jaw while he thinks about what I’ve said. “We usually don’t let men attend auctions after knowing them for such a short amount of time.”

“You’ve known me long enough, David. My brothers and I have been in here and spent enough money in this place to vouch for how serious we are, and the mayor trusts us.” I try not to throw Emily’s dad’s name around if I don’t have to, but I need this invite to happen. “Plus,” I tell him, “I don’t have a spending limit on this.”

His eyes widen the tiniest bit, but it’s enough to let me know I have his attention. Money is the only thing David cares about, and I can steal as much as I need.

“No limit, huh?” he asks, taking the glass of whiskey the waitress brings him.

I grab the vodka she’s brought for me and down it in one swallow. “No limit,” I repeat.

“The auctions can sometimes go pretty high,” he warns. “Especially for what you’re talking about.”

“I really don’t give a fuck how high it goes. I know what I want, and I’m damn well going to get it, David. The choice is yours whether you’re

the person who's going to benefit from that or if I need to look somewhere else and make another man rich."

"Hey," he says, looking offended, "I never said I wasn't going to get you an invite. I just said we don't usually do it this early." His smile grows. "You're a good man, Danil, and we want to keep the Melnikov brothers happy."

"So it's settled?" I ask, ignoring the over-the-top moans coming from the woman on Lev's lap and the fact that the blonde on her knees is now unzipping Aaron's pants. It's not something that would ever be allowed by anyone else in this club. That's what the back rooms are for. The Red Viper likes to give the illusion of class, that it's a respectable club and not a seedy bar filled with trafficked women who are forced to be here. Aaron likes to flaunt his power, though.

"I'll send the information," he says, taking another drink. "To even get in the door it's half a million." He gives a small shrug. "What happens after that is up to you. There's no guarantee you'll win one of the auctions."

"I'll win one," I tell him, not doubting that for a second.

He grins, and as soon as the blonde frees Aaron's cock and starts to wrap her lips around him, I turn to Lev and say in Russian, "You ready to get the fuck out of here?"

"Fuck yes I am." He smiles up at the redhead and switches to English. "Sorry, but we've got to go."

She pouts but gets off his lap and walks over to stand behind David. We all ignore the fact that Aaron is getting a blowjob.

"I'll expect that information before the sun comes up," I tell David.

"You'll have it," he assures me.

Lev and I turn our backs on them and walk out of the VIP area. I can't wait to burn this fucking place to the ground. Lev's quiet on the way back, but I can feel the nervous energy vibrating off him. He wants to punch something. Once we're in the underground garage below our building, we both get out, and I'm not at all surprised when he starts walking to his motorcycle.

He looks back to give me a smile, that same shit-eating one he's been giving me for as long as I can remember. His lip and eyebrow piercings mixed with all his tattoos make him look like the dangerous fucker he is.

"I'll be back later," he says. "I'm going to find a fight and then find a girl to fuck. The Red Viper always fucks with my head. I can't get hard if I

know they can’t say no.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I at least need to know that they can say no if they want to.” He lets out a laugh. “I mean, they never do, but the option needs to be there.”

I laugh and head for the elevator. “Try not to kill anyone during your fight.”

His smile grows bigger. “No promises.”

Lev’s been involved in underground fighting since Moscow, and once we moved to America, it didn’t take him long to find a new place to fight here. He wins money, but that’s not why he does it. He just really loves beating the shit out of people. It calms him on a deep level, and he won’t be able to sit still until after he’s exhausted and covered in someone else’s blood.

After grabbing two more cupcakes, I sit down at my desk and prepare for another long night. David surprises me by sending me a message less than an hour later.

The auction is in four days. Wire half a million to the account I send you. You’ll get the location information the day of. I’ll send you photos of the cargo we have coming in so you can have an idea of who you want to bid on.

I transfer the money as soon as David sends me the information. Now all I have to do is wait.

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Chapter 2

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Simona

When I step out of the airport and get my first glimpse of Bucharest, the doubts start to crowd in. Traveling to Romania had been a rash decision on my part, one I normally wouldn't make. I'm not really a *spur-of-the-moment* kind of girl. I'm more of a planner, a *let's gather more information and wait and see* kind of girl. But then my parents died in a car crash, and my desire to visit the country where they were born turned into a longing I couldn't ignore.

With the large crowds of people bustling around me, speaking a language that I don't understand because my parents never spoke it to me, I'm starting to seriously consider getting the first flight out of here. While I debate the pros and cons of this plan, a taxi pulls up in front of me.

"Do you need a ride?" he asks. His accent may be thick, but I understand him. I take his arrival as a sign from the universe and give him a friendly smile.

"I do. Can you take me to this hotel?" I show him the information I printed out, and when he sees the name, he smiles and nods before getting out to put my suitcases in the trunk. Getting in, I start to feel better about this trip. I can hire a translator if I need to. It's not going to kill me to relax and enjoy myself in a foreign city for a couple of days. Plus, I feel close to my parents here. They'd left Romania when my mom was pregnant with me. My dad had been offered a job at a university, and they'd both been excited and ready for an adventure. I guess the brave, adventurous gene didn't get passed down to me. This is my first time leaving America. Hell, it's my first time leaving the city I was born in.

That's *not* pathetic, I tell myself. I'm a homebody. So fucking what?

“This is your first time in Romania?” the cab driver asks when he gets back in and weaves us out of the airport and into the dense traffic.

“Yeah,” I tell him, gripping the door handle when he swerves in front of another car with inches to spare. “My parents were from Romania. I’ve always wanted to visit.”

He catches my eye in the rearview mirror, but I’d much rather he keep it on the road in front of us. “Welcome.”

He says something in Romanian, and I’m forced to say, “I’m sorry. I don’t speak the language.”

“Why didn’t your parents teach you? You should know where you come from. You should be proud of your roots.”

“I am proud,” I say, feeling the need to defend my parents. “They thought they were doing what was best. It took my mom a long time to learn English, and she thought that she’d just confuse me by speaking Romanian when I was younger. They always meant to teach me.” I look out the window, trying to distance myself from the memories. “They just ran out of time.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, taking a left turn with enough force to press me against the door. “It’s never too late to learn.”

“You’re right. Maybe I’ll pick up some while I’m here.”

He pulls in front of my hotel and turns back to give me another big smile. “Maybe you’ll fall in love with the country and decide to stay.”

I laugh and pull out the money to pay him. “Maybe.”

He helps me get my suitcases and then waves goodbye before pulling away from the curb. I look up at the beautiful, old building, glad that I hadn’t chosen the cheapest hotel I could find and instead went more the middle of the road. The money my parents left me is paying for this trip and will help me pay for my apartment, but it’s not enough to cover the massive student debt I’ve acquired over the years because I thought getting a degree in music was a good idea. It drove my dad crazy. He said I’d never be able to find a job. He wasn’t wrong. I love playing the piano, though, and I wanted to try and make it work. It’s the only thing that really makes me happy, but it turns out I never got over the extreme stage fright that I was sure I’d outgrow. It’s only gotten worse, and now I can’t play in front of anyone, let alone figure out a way to make money doing it.

A worry for another day, I tell myself, rolling my luggage into the lobby of the hotel. Once I’m checked in, I take the elevator to my floor, admiring

the plush, red carpet and ornate chandelier in the hall. My room is adorable. A large bed with a white down comforter, robin's egg blue walls with white trim, and a small Juliet balcony that looks out onto the city. It's so different from the small city I'm from. Everything here feels like it holds so much history. I suddenly can't wait to go exploring. It's only noon here, and there's no way I can give into the jet lag and sleep all day. That will completely fuck my sleep schedule up.

Deciding I'm going to be brave and venture out for some lunch and maybe stop at a few museums, I grab my purse and leave the hotel. My bravery lasts for about a block. I'm just about to call it quits and order some room service when a young woman gives a soft laugh and holds out her hand to me.

She says something in Romanian, but when I just give her an apologetic smile, she switches to English and says, "I'm sorry to laugh, but you look scared to death. I'm Adriana."

The woman in front of me is stunning. She's several inches taller than me, her long, blonde hair is in a messy bun that I would never be able to pull off in a million years, and the dress she's wearing probably cost a small fortune.

I shake her hand and say, "Hi, I'm Simona."

"A Romanian name for a girl who doesn't speak Romanian," she says with a smile.

"Yeah, my parents are from here, but I never learned the language." I quickly add, "I'd like to learn it, though. It's so beautiful."

"Maybe they can teach you one day."

There's an awkward pause before I say, "They died last year, but maybe I can take some lessons while I'm here or something."

She pulls me into a quick hug like we've been friends for years and pats my back. "I'm so sorry."

The hug is sweet, and it feels sincere, and I realize that it's been way too long since I had a friend. Before I completely lose my shit and embarrass myself further by crying, I pull back with a smile and say, "Thank you. It's been hard, but I thought coming here might make me feel closer to them."

She gives me another big smile and grabs my hand. "You have to let me treat you to lunch."

"Oh, you don't have to do that. I'll just grab something quick from this cafe." I point to the small shop on the corner. It's not the cutest place

around, but at least the sign out front lists the specials in English.

"No way," Adriana says with a laugh. "I can't let you do that. You need to eat somewhere authentic. This place is a tourist trap with shit food that's way overpriced."

She seems genuinely excited to have lunch with me, and I can't help but catch on to her enthusiasm. "Okay," I say, returning her smile. "I'd love to have lunch with you."

She hails us a taxi and tells him something in rapid Romanian before turning back to me. "So when did you get here?"

"Just a couple of hours ago. I didn't want to give in to jet lag, so I thought I'd grab some lunch, maybe hit a museum."

She claps her hands as her whole face lights up with excitement. "This is perfect," she squeals. "I can show you around, show you all the fun places that you'll never find in the travel guides."

"You really don't have to do all this, Adriana."

She waves away my concern with perfectly manicured, bright-red nails. "I would love to do this, and it'll give me a chance to practice my English. You'd really be doing me a huge favor by agreeing to this."

I have a feeling that she might feel sorry for me and is trying to be nice to the pathetic tourist she found on the street. I'm guessing Adriana brings home a lot of stray cats. Instead of telling her no like I would normally do, I decide to embrace the adventurous gene that must surely be buried inside me somewhere and give her a smile.

"That would be amazing. I'd love to see the real Romania."

She beams at me and gives my hand another squeeze. When the cab stops in front of what looks like a castle out of a fairytale, she gets out and motions for me to follow. I stare up at the gorgeous building, feeling completely out of place when I look down at the jeans and T-shirt I'm wearing. My fingers immediately start tapping against my jeans like my thighs are a keyboard, a nervous habit I've had since I was a kid. My fingers run through a few notes of Chopin while I nervously bite my bottom lip.

"Is there a dress code?" I ask, looking around at the men in suits and the women who look like they just stepped off the damn runway.

"Don't worry about it," Adriana says, giving me an encouraging smile. "You look great."

After a really long flight and very little sleep, I know that I most definitely do not look great, but I follow her inside, not at all surprised when we're quickly ushered to a table for two near a large window that overlooks a beautifully manicured garden. Adriana has a way of getting things done. Maybe it's the gorgeous face or the killer body, or maybe it's the whole *I won't take no for an answer* aura that surrounds her. Whatever it is, it gets shit done.

When the waiter brings us a bottle of wine, I gladly take the glass he pours me. The next two hours seem to fly by. We laugh and talk and eat way too much, and by the time the second bottle of wine comes out, I feel like I've told her my entire life story. I'm surprised I didn't put her to sleep with it.

"So you really went to an all-girls Catholic school and then you decided to do the same for college?"

I laugh at the baffled expression on her face. "I did. It was important to my parents, and I really didn't care."

"But what about boys? You must have a boyfriend back home waiting for you."

I take another drink to try and stifle my humiliation. "No, no boyfriend."

Her brown eyes widen in shock. "Like ever?"

When she sees my mortified look, she shakes her head and says, "I'm sorry. I'm way too nosy. I'm just surprised because you're so pretty. I thought for sure they'd be lining up to date you."

I laugh at how absurd the image is. I was always the friend that guys came to so they could try and get me to hook them up with the other girls in my class. I was the go-between girl. Once I realized that's who I was, I just sort of embraced it. I orchestrated a lot of dates between the local high school and our private Catholic school. I should've been charging money. I would've made a killing. When I started college, I was so used to being invisible that I didn't bother coming out of my shell. Now, I feel like I'm kind of stuck with it. I have no idea how to become visible when I've spent so long hiding in the shadows.

"We're going out tonight," Adriana says, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"What?"

She smiles and takes a ladylike sip of her wine while I down the rest of mine like an afternoon alcoholic. “I’m taking you out tonight. There’s this amazing club that you have to see.”

“I’m not much of a club person,” I try and warn her.

“You’re in a new country, Simona. It’s time to reinvent yourself.” She waves for the check and hands the waiter her card when he quickly walks over. “It’s time to let loose.”

I think about what she’s said, deciding that if I’m going to risk humiliating myself, why not do it in a foreign country that I’ll probably never return to? I’ll never see any of these people again. I can go out, dance embarrassingly bad, maybe drink a little too much, maybe even flirt a bit, and then I’ll leave. It’s the perfect opportunity to be bold with very little fear of repercussions.

“Okay,” I tell her.

She takes her card back and looks at her phone. “Perfect. I’ll invite a few friends to come along, and I’ll pick you up at your hotel at nine.”

I’m already thinking about how tired I’m going to be, but there’s still plenty of time for me to squeeze in a quick nap. I don’t bother telling her that nine is about the time I usually put my pajamas on. Most twenty-two-year-olds don’t have a bedtime of ten on a Friday night, so I keep that embarrassing little tidbit to myself.

Adriana insists on making sure I get back to my hotel safely, and when I wave goodbye to her, I can’t help but feel excited about tonight. Closing the curtains, I force myself to try and nap. Thanks to the wine I had at lunch, it doesn’t take long before I’m out. When my alarm wakes me, I have plenty of time to shower and get ready. I decide on the simple, black-but-sexy dress that I packed on a whim, but I’m stuck pairing it with ballet flats because I didn’t pack heels. I spend more time on my hair and makeup than I normally would, but I really want to look nice tonight. I’m ready to have some fun, and I want to look hot while I do it.

When I walk out of my hotel, I’m surprised to see a black limo parked out front. I’m about to ignore it and keep walking as I look for Adriana, but before I’ve reached the bumper, she’s opening the door with a laugh and waving me in.

“Come on, Simona. We’re arriving in style tonight.”

I scoot in next to her, noticing the red, low-cut dress she’s wearing with matching red heels that are laced up her slender ankles. She looks like a

model, and I look like me. I'm used to this, though. The go-between friend. At least it's a role I'm comfortable with. I can repay Adriana's kindness by fielding men and helping her hook up with the hottest one I can find.

"You look amazing," she tells me, and I smile to let her know I appreciate what she's doing. "I'm being serious. The men are going to go crazy over you tonight."

I laugh and watch the city outside my window. Bucharest at night is beautiful. The place is lit up and vibrant, the streets crowded with cars, and the sidewalks full of men and women who are coming and going from the various clubs and bars or enjoying a late supper at one of the outdoor cafes. The limo stops in front of a huge building with a long, winding line out front of it. Adriana gets out, and I follow her lead. She bypasses the line and marches right up to the bouncer in her four-inch heels, giving him a wink when he immediately steps aside to let her in. No surprise to anyone, he quickly steps in front of me to block my path.

"I'm with her," I say, feeling like the world's biggest dumbass.

He's about to laugh, I can see it in his eyes, but Adriana yells something in Romanian, and the man quickly steps aside.

"Sorry," she says, grabbing my arm so we won't be separated again. "I thought you were right behind me."

I don't bother telling her that I was, and that there's no way in hell that ever would've mattered, because my attention is immediately pulled to the massive club we've just stepped into. There are four levels to the place, each of them packed with bodies, and the music is so loud I can barely hear Adriana when she points to the bar and yells, "Let's get drinks first."

I let her order for me because I have no idea what to get, but when I try to pay, she just waves her hand at me.

"Don't worry about it. I come here all the time. They'll just put it on my tab."

Taking the drink she hands me, I take a sip. The sweetness of it covers the alcohol, making it the kind of drink that you could easily chug, not realizing how drunk you're getting until it's way too late. I decide to take it slow, but Adriana just laughs and urges me to drink more. She finishes her own glass and sets it on the bar, motioning for the bartender to make us two more.

When they're fixed, we each grab one and Adriana leans closer so I can hear her when she says, "Follow me. I have some friends I want you to

meet.”

I follow her blonde head through the crowd and up a flight of stairs. When we hit a roped-off section, she leans closer and says something to the woman whose job it is to make sure no one enters the VIP area who isn’t allowed to be there. The woman looks over at me and then nods at Adriana before unhooking the rope and letting us through. I smile at her, but she looks away and puts the rope back in place.

We walk up another flight of stairs until we come to a large seating area. Several women linger around the space in very little clothing, and there are three men seated in leather chairs. They’re in suits with drinks in hand, each of them handsome and staring right at me, probably wondering who accidentally let me into the super-cool-people area.

Adriana starts talking to them in Romanian, and I try not to stand here looking awkward while they have an entire conversation that I’m completely ignorant of. When a waitress walks in with a tray of drinks, I happily take one.

One of the men motions me over, patting the empty seat next to him. “Adriana says you’re new to our country.” He gives me a big smile. “Welcome.”

I sit down, returning his smile before looking around at the others. One of the men pulls Adriana into his lap, and she laughs and smiles at him before kissing his cheek. The way she’s looking at him makes it clear that they’re a lot more than friends.

“How do you like Romania so far?” the man next to me asks.

“I like it a lot,” I tell him. “It’s so beautiful, and everyone’s so friendly.”

He smiles and waves the waitress over again. Motioning to her full tray, he says, “Please, help yourself. It’s on me tonight.”

I thank him and take another drink. While I sip at it, I turn to look down at the dance floor. The bodies are so close together it looks like a living, pulsing thing. The men and women dance, and it’s nonstop fluid motion that mixes seamlessly with the strobe lights that pulse with the music. I can’t look away, and when things start to grow fuzzy, I shake my head to clear it.

“Are you okay?” the man asks me.

“What’s your name?” I ask him, hearing a faint slur to my words. I turn my head to see him, feeling the room spin as I do so.

He smiles and leans closer, cupping my face in one of his hands. His dark eyes bore into mine. “My name isn’t important, little one.” He turns to Adriana and gives her a smile. “You did a good job with this one. She looks so fucking innocent. Are you sure no one will be looking for her?”

I hear Adriana laugh, but it sounds so far away. “No, her parents died last year, and trust me when I say her life is pathetic. She doesn’t even have a cat that will miss her.”

She lets out another laugh while my brain struggles to catch up. I may not understand exactly what’s going on, but I know enough to know I’m in deep shit. My drink falls from my fingers, and when I try to stand, the man brings his other hand around to clamp onto my hip, holding me in place. It doesn’t take much. I feel weak, like I don’t even have the strength to stand.

“What?” I slur, and then can’t get the rest of the sentence out.

The man laughs. It’s a cruel sound that sends a spike of fear straight through me. “What’s going to happen to you?” he asks. “Is that what you’re wondering?”

I nod as best I can.

He drags his thumb along my cheek. “Nothing good, sweetheart. I can promise you that.” Leaning closer, he brings his mouth close to my ear. “You shouldn’t be so trusting of strangers, little one. You’re going to regret so many things when you wake up. But first we’re going to take some photos.”

He kisses my cheek, laughing when I try to pull away from his touch. I hear the click of photos being taken, but it sounds so far away. I try to ask what’s going on, and when that fails, I try to raise my hand to get someone’s attention, but I can’t move. I have a moment of pure horror, a terror unlike anything I’ve ever known before the darkness overtakes me, leaving me with nothing.

When I wake, I have several seconds of peace before everything comes rushing back to me, and in that brief moment I realize that it’s the last moment of calm I’ll probably ever have. I sit up with a jolt, wincing at the sharp pain in my head. My hands are zip tied together at the wrists, and I’m in a small room with nothing but a dirty mat and a bucket in the corner. It’s the bucket that really brings the reality of the situation into sharp, brutal focus. I’ve seen enough movies to know that I have gone and truly fucked myself.

Wrapping my arms around my legs, I rest my head on my knees, cursing my own stupidity. I'd never once thought Adriana was anything but sincere. God, she must've been laughing her perfect ass off at the pathetic American girl who was so eager to tell her life story and go nightclubbing with her. And then I'd gone and drank every goddamn drink she handed me. I broke every rule there is for being safe and responsible, and now I'm in fucking Romania where no one will ever find me or even know that I'm gone.

Tears prick my eyes when I realize that no one is going to miss me. My parents, my only family, are gone. My friends that no longer talk or hang out with me, yeah, they're not even going to notice my absence. The only person I can count on to notice is my landlord, and that's only when the rent becomes overdue, which won't be for six months because I paid in advance when I got the money my parents left me. I was trying to be a responsible goddamn adult.

Dragging myself to my feet, I go to inspect the door. I'm not surprised to find it locked. I debate banging on it. Do I really want to draw attention to myself? Maybe it's better if they think I'm still knocked out. Pacing the small room, I look everywhere for hidden cameras but don't see any. I keep glancing at the bucket because my bladder is really starting to scream at me.

Fuck it. I drop my panties and hike up my dress. With my bound wrists it takes way longer than it should. I squat over the bucket, grateful that at least it's empty, and swallow my pride as I pee. I'm prone to UTIs, and the last thing I need is to be stuck in this room with an infection. I'm guessing that giving me antibiotics won't be high on my captor's list. My thighs ache by the time I'm done, but at least there's a roll of toilet paper I can use and my bladder is no longer screaming at me.

I've just finished when I hear someone unlocking the door in front of me. I scurry into the corner, not caring that I've basically trapped myself even further. My brain is in full-on panic mode and rational thought isn't going to be making an appearance anytime soon. The man who walks in is the same one from the club. I don't remember much, but I remember the way he'd looked at me, the dead look in his dark eyes and the way he'd stroked my cheek.

"Good. You're awake," he says, walking in and eyeing the bucket.

I refuse to be embarrassed about pissing in a bucket, but I also know that's all I'll be doing in it. I will fucking explode from the inside out before

I shit in that goddamn bucket. Just the thought of it has my cheeks heating up. He laughs like he can read my mind and straightens his tie.

“What do you want with me?” I ask, hating how shaky my voice sounds. “I’m not rich. You’re not going to get any ransom for holding me.”

He laughs again and steps closer. I hold my bound hands against my chest, trying to make myself as small as possible. He braces his hands on either side of my head and leans down so we’re eye level.

“I’m not holding you for ransom.”

“Then what do you want from me?” My body starts to shake, one horrible scenario after another rushing through my mind until my breaths turn ragged and I can barely breathe.

“I’m going to sell you, little one,” he says, giving me a cruel smile, “and you’re going to make me a fucking fortune.”

He grabs my arm and pulls me from the wall, dragging me out the door. I trip, but his fingers dig into my skin, bruising me and making me let out a pained yelp.

“Time to see the doctor. Let’s hope you’re as pure as Adriana said you are. It won’t go well for you if I find out you’re just a little whore that everyone’s had a piece of.”

I look around the dirty hall, noticing all the other shut doors that line both sides. Good god, are they all filled with women like me? When I freeze at the thought, he pulls me along after him, not caring that I almost trip and fall again. The room he leads me into looks like a makeshift doctor’s office from hell. There’s an exam table that’s seen better days, dark stains on the floor that I’m hoping will always remain a mystery to me, and a line of utensils that I’m willing to bet are not sterilized.

“Wait,” I say, trying to pull my arm free of his grip. “Please don’t do this.”

“Don’t waste your breath,” he tells me. “You’re nothing but a product to me, and we’re about to find out if you’re a valuable one or not.”

I meet his eyes, stunned at the coldness in them. It’s not hate, that at least I could maybe reason with. Hate is an emotion I can understand, something I’m familiar with because I’m feeling a shit ton of it right now, but his eyes are empty. There’s nothing there. There’s no reasoning with a person who views you as nothing but property.

When an older man enters the room, the first thing I do is beg. “Please help me,” I plead with him. The man looks up, giving me a friendly smile,

looking every bit like someone's favorite grandpa, and it gives me a small dose of hope. "I'm being held here against my will. Please help me."

The man walks over to me, patting my arm with a smile as he says something in Romanian to my captor.

"English?" I ask him. "Please, do you speak English?"

My captor gives an annoyed sigh and pulls me to the table. "He doesn't speak English, and he wouldn't give a fuck even if he did. Now get on the damn table."

When I hesitate, he lifts me up, roughly sitting me on the dirty exam table. He stands right next to me, daring me to try and make a run for it. The old man walks over and sits on a stool in front of me. He pulls out the stirrups for my feet as I tighten my legs together, knowing and fearing what's about to come.

My captor t*sks* at me like I'm a disobedient child and grabs onto my legs, spreading them apart and putting my feet in the stirrups.

"Keep them there," he warns, "or I will tie you to the fucking table."

I force myself to be still, but I can't stop my body from shaking. He sees it and gives me a wink as he drags his finger down my thigh and says something in Romanian to the doctor who's now less than a foot from my crotch. When he reaches up and starts to pull my underwear off, I start to cry. It's humiliating and degrading and terrifying, and that's exactly why they're doing it. They're letting me know that I have zero say in this, that I'm completely helpless, and that they can do whatever the fuck they want.

When I'm naked from the waist down, my captor eyes me as my face turns red and more tears slip out. "You need to be waxed. Men want to see exactly what they're getting. They want smooth pussy."

The doctor lets out a groan that almost makes me dry heave as he spreads me apart. I dart my eyes to the man standing above me. "What the hell is going on? Are you seriously trying to see if I'm a virgin?" Anger and humiliation rage through me and I can't help but spit out, "You know that's fucking stupid, right? It's antiquated as fuck. Lots of women don't even have hymens, dipshit. You can lose them riding a damn bike when you're a kid."

His jaw tenses, and I know I've pissed him off. He braces his hands on either side of my head, lowering closer to me so he's invading my space as he lets me see how much bigger he is than me. He's nothing but a fucking bully, and bullies get off on hurting others. He's a monster who preys on

anyone he thinks is weaker. I try not to show how scared I am, but he sees it. I can tell by the amused glint in his dark eyes.

“You better hope you still have yours, sweetheart. If I think for one second that you’re not a virgin, then you’re going to be sold to a club instead of to a private buyer. Want to guess what you’ll be doing every night for the rest of your pathetic life?”

“You’re a fucking sex trafficker?”

I’m about to say something else, but my attention is diverted when the doctor slides his finger into me.

“What the fuck?” I yell, trying to scramble away.

My captor puts one hand on my shoulder and the other on one of my thighs, pinning me in place as the doctor slowly slides his finger in and out of me.

“Shh, sweetheart. This is part of his payment.” He gives a soft laugh. “He likes to finger the tight pussies who come through here.”

When I hear a zipper being undone, I whimper and try harder to escape, but he just grips me tighter.

“Relax, he’s just going to jerk off.” He gives another laugh like we’re sharing a secret. “I know it’s weird as fuck, but the old man likes what he likes.”

I cry while I’m kept in his vice-like grip and the old fucking pervert jerks off. My fingers try to form the notes of a song that I composed a few months ago, but it doesn’t work. I can’t hear the music in my head. All I can feel is fear, and it presses down on me until I can’t breathe, robbing me of everything else.

When I hear him groan right before a wet heat hits my inner thigh, I can’t resist dry heaving any longer. I turn my head, willing myself to not throw up. I suck in huge lungfuls of air, telling myself that it’s going to be okay, that somehow I’ll manage to get out of this, but with each second that passes, it’s getting harder and harder to believe.

“You can’t just keep me in Romania,” I whisper.

My captor smiles and gives my cheek a hard enough smack to turn my head back to face him.

“You’re in America, sweetheart.”

I’m too stunned to speak. Thoughts race through my head while he talks to the doctor in Romanian. How long was I knocked out? How the fuck did

they get me out of the country so quickly? I'm still trying to process what he's just said when he turns his focus back to me.

"Lucky for you, you didn't lose your hymen on your bike." He smiles and pulls out a red rubber band from his pocket before slipping it over my hand so it sits on my wrist by the zip tie. "You're going to make us a fucking fortune."

He picks me up, roughly pulling my underwear back on before dragging me from the room. We walk past several closed doors before he opens the last one on the right. Inside are two women who jump to standing when the see the man who's hauling me in. He shoves me in their direction.

"Get her cleaned up and ready to go. The auction is tonight."

Before he leaves, he looks at me. "Don't waste your time trying to get them to help you. They work for me, and I will beat them to within an inch of their lives if you try to talk to them, and I'll make you watch while I do it."

And with that, he steps out and shuts the door behind him. I look at the two women in front of me, and when I see the terrified look in their eyes, I know I can't do it. I can't do anything that's going to get them beaten because of me. It's not their fault they're here. They're victims to this asshole just like I am, and there's no way in hell they could do anything to help me even if they wanted to. When I let out a resigned sigh and take a step closer, I can see the relief wash over them. It makes me wonder how many times they've been hurt because some poor woman was trying like hell to escape.

Over the next couple of hours, I'm given the royal *I've just been kidnapped and now you need to make me look good enough to sell* treatment. I'm washed clean, but even with that fucker's semen scrubbed off me, I still feel dirty. Then I'm waxed in every conceivable place and put in a tiny black dress that's made of lace and completely see-through. I'm not given a bra or panties. The two women are silent as they work on my hair, never speaking a word, and I have to bite my tongue to keep from asking them a million questions, because even if they can't help me, maybe they can give me some information that might help me to escape later, or at least give me some idea of what to expect at this auction.

When my captor walks into the room a few minutes later, the two women stand up and step away from me. They keep their eyes down, taking on a submissive stance that I'm sure this fucker is eating up.

“You clean up nice, little one,” he says, running his eyes over me, checking his product out to make sure I pass inspection. “Let’s go. The others are waiting.”

He grabs my arm, and I have just enough time to look back and catch one of the women giving me a look of such grief that I can’t help but take that as a very bad sign. I don’t know what awaits me, but she does, and that look says it all. It’s going to be way worse than anything I’ve imagined.

My captor walks a little slower since I’m in heels, and I guess he doesn’t want to make me fall and risk messing up all the hard work that’s been put into me. When we round the corner, I’m surprised to see a long line of women, all of them dressed like I am, all of them looking just as shocked and terrified. He puts me at the end of the line and then walks over to two other men who are guarding a set of double doors. Looking around, I notice the fire alarm on the wall and the set of elevators on the other side of the room. This place looks like a rundown hotel, the kind of place that used to rent by the hour and has only gotten shabbier with the passing of time.

When the doors open, two men walk in, and the entire room stills. I thought my captor was the one in charge, but there’s no denying that these two men are the top of the food chain. My captor greets them with a smile, and then starts speaking a language that’s not Romanian. It sounds Eastern European, but I’m not sure what it is.

The men are dressed in suits, and everything about them screams money and power. They’re handsome, there’s no denying that, but they hold the same cold look as my captor. When they walk over to the other end of the line, all the women duck their heads as they pass by. I should do the same, I know I should, but when they reach me, I keep my head held high. If I’m going to be sold like a fucking cow at the county fair, then I at least want to see the man responsible. Besides, it’s not like it can really get any worse than it already is.

The man’s blue eyes meet mine as the corner of his mouth curls up. He says something in that language again, and the men around him laugh. Stepping closer, he runs his eyes over me and then grips my chin tight enough to make me wince.

“If I didn’t already have my own pet, I’d keep you for myself.” His accent is thick, but I understand every word he’s saying. “I like defiant things.” His fingers dig in even harder. “I like to watch them break.”

He keeps staring at me, and when he feels my body start to shake, he lets out a soft laugh and lets me go, shoving me back hard enough so that I have to struggle to keep myself upright. He straightens his tie, giving me a glimpse of a black feather tattoo peeking out from the cuff of his suit. The man he came in with laughs and gives me a wink before they turn away and walk out the door. My captor hollers something out to them before switching back to English and yelling at us, “Grab a hood and put it over your head. My men will lead you to the cars. If you yell, you’re dead.”

None of us doubt for a second that he’ll do it. When it’s my turn, I put the black hood over my head. Darkness surrounds me as a pair of hands grab my arm and lead me outside to one of the waiting cars. I focus on my breathing, trying like hell to keep calm while two other women are put in the car with me. When we start moving, my breathing turns ragged, and I move my zip-tied hands to the girl next to me, breathing out a sigh of relief when she clutches my hands just as tightly as I’m clutching hers. I don’t know her. I have no idea who she is, but in this moment, she’s everything, the lifeline that’s keeping me sane. I grip her hands and try not to think about what awaits us.

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Chapter 3

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Danil

I pull up to the nondescript building, stopping in front of the young man standing outside, just like the list of instructions David sent me told me to do. He gets in my car to park it somewhere else while another man walks out to greet me.

"Mr. Melnikov, so happy to have you join us." He holds out a hand to me, his bleached teeth gleaming in the late evening darkness. I take it, noticing his clammy hands and how they feel like he hasn't done an actual day of work his entire fucking life. "David said you're one of the VIP bidders tonight, and I have one of our best boxes ready and waiting for you." He gives me another creepy grin. "You're going to love the view."

I follow him inside without a word. He's no one of importance, and I'm not going to waste my time being nice to this piece of shit if I don't have to. He leads me into the building and then guides me to an elevator. We're the only ones around, and I have no doubt it was planned this way. Secrecy is at the forefront of everything this organization does, and the more people who see you at an auction of women, the more likely it is to come back and bite you in the ass.

When the elevator opens, I see a long hallway with a line of black doors. Each door has a man in a suit posted outside it, and when we walk past, they keep their eyes down, hands clasped together in front of their bodies, all of them quietly awaiting orders. We stop at the last door, and when he opens it, I see a small room with a leather chair and a large window that's currently shrouded in black.

"The stage is right beyond there," the man explains, pointing at the window. "They can't see you, but you'll have a very clear view of them."

He motions to a small red button attached to the arm of the chair. “Hit that if you want to be heard by them. You can order them to turn around or to say something, whatever you need from them to ensure they’re the right one for you.”

I hide my disgust while he hands me a tablet, and then I try not to laugh as he walks me through how to use it.

“This is the file with photos, and this is what you’ll use to place your bids. All money must be transferred before you leave this room or you won’t be able to collect your prize.” He looks up and gives me a big smile. “Good luck, Mr. Melnikov. I’ll be waiting right outside.”

I nod and sit down once he’s shut the door. I’d gone over the photos that David sent me, over and over again, and I’m still not sure how in the hell I’m supposed to pick one. How do you decide which life to save? Figuring I have enough time before it starts to look through them again, I open the folder and scroll through the photos. They’re just as depressing as all the other times I’ve looked through them—terrified, stunned faces, most of them looking drugged, some looking barely eighteen. I’m about to close the folder, unable to stomach any more, when I notice the new photo. There were twenty images in the file David sent, but now there are twenty-one.

As soon as I click on the last photo, the screen fills with the image of a drugged woman, and it’s like I’ve just been punched in the chest. Everything else disappears except for her. She’s barely able to keep her eyes open, but the deep, vibrant blue of them is impossible to miss. Her long, dark hair is loose, falling around her shoulders, and there’s something about her that seems so small, so fragile, so fucking innocent that it makes me want to kill every motherfucker in the place for daring to drag her into this.

She’s listed as Lot Number 2079 like we’re at a fucking Christie’s auction and I’m about to bet on a goddamn vase. My foot starts tapping a fast rhythm as I grab my laptop and attempt to hack into their system. I’m not too surprised to find that it’s not possible. If I had a few hours, I could probably do it, but they’ve obviously hired a team to make sure no one can get in. I’d be suspicious if they hadn’t.

Right as I put my computer away, the lights dim in my room as the one outside my window is turned on. A small stage is right in front of me, and when I stand up, I can see a line of windows just like mine curving around the room, ten that I can see, as well as another level above us. I can’t see

them, just like they can’t see me, but I have no doubt that every box is filled.

“Gentlemen, the auction will start in one minute.” The voice comes in smoothly from the recessed speaker above my head. “Just a reminder that all bets are final.”

Sitting down, I grab the tablet and wait for it to start. I recognize the first woman who walks out, I’ve stared at her photo enough to have memorized every detail of her scared face.

The voice comes back through the intercom. “First up is Lot Number 2058. Nineteen years of age, and this one is a virgin, gentlemen.”

Immediately the bids start coming in as the young woman stands under the glaring light, body shaking and eyes threatening to spill over.

“Turn around.”

The voice that comes through isn’t the same one who’s been making announcements. It’s one of the bidders wanting a better look at the merchandise. I grit my teeth and watch the poor girl turn around. Her dress is completely see-through, and I can see the humiliation written all over her face when she’s finally allowed to turn back around. I have to force myself to not buy all of them. That would be way too suspicious, and it would only hurt our plans to find Alina. I can’t do anything for these women, so I just watch as bids are placed, and she’s finally sold for a million dollars.

She walks off the stage on legs that are shaking so badly she almost trips, and I can’t help but think that I could’ve saved her. I have no idea who bought her, but it’s painfully obvious the kind of man he is, and it’s naive to think that anything but pain and misery are waiting for her. If I had saved her, then I couldn’t save the blue-eyed girl, and she’s the one I have to have. The decision was made the second I saw her.

I watch the rest of the auction, forcing myself to not look away from the endless parade of women and the horrified looks on their faces. The virgins each go for around a million, but the ones the announcer says aren’t virgins, the ones forced to wear blue rubber bands around their zip-tied wrists, go for much less. I watch a poor girl get sold for twenty thousand, and I can see it in her eyes—she knows exactly what’s about to happen. She’ll be thrown into a shit club, forced to endure rape night after night until she’s considered too old. Then, if she’s lucky, it’ll be a bullet to the head.

I grow angrier and antsier with each passing minute until finally Lot 2079 is called and she steps out onto the stage.

“Lot 2079 is a twenty-two-year-old virgin,” the announcer says. She walks out slowly, and even though she looks terrified, she keeps her head held high, and fuck do I admire that. Her big, blue eyes stare out at the wall of dark windows in front of her, and she manages to look like a goddamn queen standing before her enemies. She’s not going to give these fuckers an inch. Bids immediately start coming in, and I make sure to always stay one step ahead.

“Turn around,” one of the bidders demands.

She hesitates before slowly turning in a circle. I try not to notice how amazing her ass looks, but it’s impossible not to, even if it does make me guilty. Her fingers tap out a nervous rhythm against her thighs as she waits for her fate to be decided. When the bids hit two million with no signs of slowing down, the announcer lets out a soft laugh.

“Looks like we might set a new record, gentlemen. Let me remind you again that payment must be made before you can exit the box and all sales are final.”

When it gets close to three million, everyone else has bowed out except for me and one other bidder. I’m not worried. We can do this all fucking day. I wasn’t lying when I said my funds were unlimited. Besides, I’m just going to steal back all my money when we take these fuckers down.

At 3.5 million, the other bidder finally quits and I’m declared the winner. The woman I’ve just purchased walks off the stage, and I wish I could tell her that everything’s going to be okay, that she’s safe and I’ll never hurt her, but I can’t. She can’t know the truth, not yet anyway.

When the stage goes black again, the light brightens in my room, and I quickly transfer the money I owe. Right on cue, the man who lead me up here opens the door and gives me a big smile.

“Congratulations, Mr. Melnikov. You’ve set a record here today, and I have no doubt that you’ll find her worth every penny.”

I stand as he opens the door and ushers me out.

“As the highest bidder, you’re allowed to collect your winnings first.”

I follow him out without a word. We walk past the men still standing watch outside the other doors and back into the elevator. This time, we go to the bottom level and step out into another long hallway. He brings me to a room where a man is already waiting, tattoo equipment out and ready.

“How do you want her marked?” the man who lead me here asks. “She can take the black viper ouroboros tattoo around the left wrist, or you can

have it branded onto her. The choice is yours."

"Tattoo," I say, speaking my first word to him while trying to hide my disgust at the idea of making a woman endure the pain of having her skin branded.

"Wonderful," he says and then points to the man with the tattoo gun. "This is Ernst. He'll be giving the tattoo."

I nod at him while he eyes the tattoos on my hands and neck. I'm clearly no stranger to the process. Before Ernst can start asking questions about all my ink, the door opens and the girl I just bought is lead in. When she stumbles, the bastard grips her arm tighter and shoves her the rest of the way.

"Take your fucking hands off her," I growl at him.

The air in the room changes. It becomes tense and dangerous, and I have to struggle to keep myself under control. I step closer, using my height and build to intimidate the little fucker.

"I just paid over three million dollars for the woman that you're dragging in here like a piece of fucking trash." I take a step closer. "She's mine to touch, not yours, so get your fucking hands off her."

"Sorry, sir," he mumbles, letting her arm go and taking a step back.

I look over at her, meeting her eyes for the first time, and the dark blue of them pulls me in just like they had in the photo. She looks terrified, and all I want to do is pull her against me and tell her that everything is okay and that she's safe, but I can't do that. Instead, I grab her wrist and take out the knife that's in my pocket.

"Mr. Melnikov, this is not how we do things," the man who lead me in here says, but I ignore him and cut through her zip tie. I see the bruises on her skin and feel a very strong urge to turn around and put my knife inside the fucker who's apparently my escort for the entire goddamn night. I brush my thumb along her inner wrist, and I see her eyes widen in surprise at the intimate touch.

"Do I own her or not?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Then I can cut her free if I want to." I turn to the man and give a soft laugh. "Trust me, there's no way in fuck she's going to overpower me."

He relaxes a little bit and then motions to Ernst. "He can go ahead with the tattoo when you're ready."

She sees Ernst preparing the tattoo gun and goes pale at the sight. Without thinking, I take off my suit jacket and put it around her and then sit down, pulling her into my lap. Her whole body tenses, and I curse my own stupidity. She darts her eyes to the gun I have holstered under my left arm. She's scared to death of me, and now I've just put her in my lap, a place she clearly has no desire to be.

I know she came from Eastern Europe, so I speak to her in Russian, hoping that she understands it, or at least enough to catch what I'm trying to say.

"It's okay." I grab her left forearm and hold it out to Ernst. "We can leave as soon as it's over."

Ernst pulls up the sleeve of my jacket, exposing her bare skin. I get the distinct impression that he does speak Russian, so I don't say anything else. The woman in my lap doesn't relax, but she doesn't try to fight what's going on. We both watch as the black viper slowly takes shape. I hate that she has to get marked, but I tell myself we can have it removed when all this is done. For now, there's no getting around it.

Her right hand sits in her lap, hidden from everyone else, and I watch as she makes the same sort of tapping motions that she'd done when she'd been on stage. The more I watch, the more it becomes obvious that this isn't some random, nervous fidgeting. It's like she's playing an instrument. Her fingers move like she's playing a piano, and her body relaxes even more the longer she does it. I can't take my eyes off her delicate, slender fingers, and when I run my thumb over the back of her hand, she stills and sucks in a quick breath.

I pull my hand away, but she doesn't start playing again, just grips her thigh and keeps her eyes on the tattoo that's quickly taking shape. Ernst may be one ugly motherfucker with his nose that's bent from not healing properly after a break and the eyes that are too small and way too close together, but he's got some skills with a tattoo gun. Once the ouroboros is finished and he's pulled away, I lift her arm up so I can get a better look at it. Her skin is red, and I know it hurts her, but she doesn't say a word. I take off the ridiculous red rubber band and toss it on the table.

When he reaches for a needle and then tries to grab her arm again, I pull her out of his reach. "What the fuck is that?"

"Tracker," he says.

Her body stiffens in my lap. I look at Ernst. "Not necessary."

“If she escapes, there is no refund.”

“She won’t escape,” I tell him, knowing there’s no way in fuck I’m going to let him inject her with something that will allow them to know her whereabouts at all times. No fucking way.

I ignore Ernst’s pissed-off face and look up at the man who’s been escorting me around. “Are we free to leave?”

“Yes, sir,” he says.

I grab her hips and help her up, and then I keep an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in close to me. She may not appreciate it, but I need to keep her safe, and there’s no way any of these fuckers are ever going to touch her again.

“I’m very happy with my purchase tonight,” I tell him. “I’d like to extend my thanks to whoever’s in charge of all this.” I smile and gesture around. “This is a pretty impressive set up.”

The man smiles but shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Mr. Melnikov, but no one is allowed to meet the man in charge.”

I act like I’m not upset in the slightest. “Well, please pass on my thanks.” I look down at the woman in my arms. “She’s exceeded my expectations.”

He smiles and opens the door for us. “I will, sir, and it’s been a pleasure doing business with you.”

We follow him further down the hall. I keep my arm around her while she fists my suit jacket, keeping it pulled tightly around her still shaking body. She doesn’t try to push my arm off, but I think that’s more out of fear and exhaustion than anything else.

Instead of leading us back up to the main entrance I came in at, he brings us to an underground parking garage. The only people here are valets, and my Aston Martin is just being brought around when we arrive. I slip the valet a tip and open the door for the woman I just bought. She gets in, being careful to avoid looking at me, and when I shut the door, I see her press up against it, presumably to get as far away from where I’m going to be sitting as possible.

I get in, and as soon as my door is shut, I drive us the fuck out of here. Glancing over at her, I see her hand gripping the door handle and her eyes straining to see out the car window, probably trying to place exactly where she is.

“I know you’re scared,” I tell her in Russian, “but I promise I’m not going to hurt you.”

She looks over at me, brows scrunched in confusion. “Why do you keep speaking to me in that language?”

I’m so shocked that it takes me a second to switch to English and ask. “You’re American?”

“Yes, and you’re apparently just like them. Will it do me any good to beg for my freedom, or should I just bide my time until I can kill you and make a break for it?”

“I’m not going to hurt you,’ I tell her. She lets out a harsh laugh, but I keep going. “I know it’s hard for you to believe right now, but I’m not.”

“You make a habit of buying kidnapped women, Mr. Melnikov?”

“You’re my first, and you can call me Danil.”

I sigh and call Roman, telling him in Russian what’s happened and that we’re on our way. When I hang up, I look over at her, knowing that nothing I can say right now is going to make her feel better. She doesn’t trust a word out of my mouth, and I don’t blame her. Why would she? My only hope is that when she meets everyone else, she’ll realize we’re telling her the truth. She rubs at her wrist, wincing when her fingers touch the raw skin.

“I’m sorry you had to get that. It was unavoidable. I’ll put some medicine on it when we get home.”

“Whatever,” she mumbles. “It’s not like it matters.”

“It does to me.” I pull into the parking garage of our building, and when I’ve parked, I turn to look at her. “What’s your name?”

“Simona.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

She rolls her eyes at me.

“Look, I know you don’t trust me, and that’s fine, for now anyway, but I need you to at least trust me enough to hear me out when we get inside. Will you give me that?”

She studies me in the dim light, trying to get a read on me, and after several tense seconds, she nods. “Fine. It’s not like I have a choice anyway.”

I don’t argue because she doesn’t have a choice. If she fought me on it, I’d pin her against me until she wore herself out and then I’d tell her everything she needs to hear. This way is just a lot easier. We get out of the car, and I motion to the private elevator in the corner.

“That’s us.”

“Us?”

“I live here with my four brothers and my sister-in-law.”

Her face pales at my words, and as soon as the elevator doors open, she squeezes herself into the corner, trying to put as much distance between us as possible.

“Are you planning on sharing me?”

Her voice is nothing but a whisper, and I hate how terrified she sounds.

“What? Fuck no I’m not going to share you.” I don’t bother mentioning that she already feels like mine and that there’s no way in fuck I’d ever share her with another living soul, but I figure that might just scare her even more. “It’s not like that,” I try and tell her.

The doors open, and when she sees all the family photos, she looks more confused than ever. Roman told me to go ahead and let her get changed and cleaned up before we spring all the heavy shit on her, so I guide Simona to the set of stairs in the corner. She takes one look at them and shakes her head.

“I’m not going down into your fucked-up dungeon room.”

She looks around the penthouse, looking more scared with each passing second.

“It’s not a dungeon. I just want to show you the bathroom. You can shower and put on some clothes if you want. I thought you might feel better to get out of that,” I say, motioning to the nonexistent dress that’s currently hidden by my jacket.

“Why do you have a gun?”

“To keep myself safe.”

“Why do you need to keep yourself safe?”

I sigh and start walking down the stairs. “I promise I’ll answer all your questions once you’re out of the shower.”

She hesitates, waiting at the top of the stairs before finally taking a cautious step. When nothing bad happens, she takes another, slowly climbing down. She follows me to my room, stopping in the doorway. I grab the clothes that Roman said would be waiting for her and hold them out.

“Emily, my sister-in-law, left these for you to wear. You look about the same size. You’re a little taller, but they should still work. We can order you anything you want later.”

“Will you let me go?” Her blue eyes search mine, looking for some scrap of humanity, some hint that I’m the good guy. I may not be the same kind of monster as the men who took her, but I’m a monster nonetheless. I don’t want her to see that side of me, but I’m also not going to pretend to be something I’m not.

“We can talk when you get out,” I tell her.

She grabs the clothes on the way to the bathroom, and when I hear the door lock, I run a hand through my hair, wishing I’d been able to get more sleep. I’m fucking exhausted, and this night isn’t even close to being over. Part of me wants to wait until she gets out in case she needs anything, but I know I need to talk to my brothers more than I need to stand here and think about her taking a shower.

I leave my messenger bag at my desk and go back upstairs. They’re all waiting for me in the living room. Emily is sitting in Roman’s lap, eager for an update just like the rest of them, so I stick to English as I give them a rundown of everything that happened.

“She must be scared to death,” Emily says.

“She is,” I tell her, “but she’s strong. I get the feeling she’d put up one hell of a fight if anyone tried anything with her.”

“I like her already,” Lev says with a grin.

“Does she know anything about the men who took her?” Matvey asks.

“I haven’t talked to her about anything yet. I told her we could talk after she got changed. The dress they had her in was ridiculous. I thought she’d feel more comfortable talking once she wasn’t practically naked.”

“She’ll definitely feel better when she has some actual clothes on,” Emily says. “Do you think the ones I picked out will fit her? I can find something else.”

“No, I think they’ll work. She’s a little taller than you, but it should be fine.”

“What was it like?” Vitaly asks. “Did you see anyone?”

“No, they’ve got it set up perfectly. Every bidder is brought in separately, and there’s a man standing watch outside every room. I didn’t see any of the other men who were betting. Each room has a large window facing the stage, but you can’t see in any of the other windows. Simona was the last girl, and I had to outbid some other fucker to get her.”

“What made you pick her?” Roman asks. “Last I heard you couldn’t decide.”

I sit down across from him and scrub a hand over the stubble I need to shave. “She wasn’t in the photos that David sent me. I saw her after I got there. The man assigned to me gave me a tablet with all their photos. Hers was the last. She must’ve been added on late or something. I don’t know,” I say, shaking my head. “I just knew she was the one.”

I try not to think about the faces of all the women I had to leave behind and continue with the story. “Before I was allowed to leave the room, I had to transfer the money, and then they brought me to her. Ernst, the ugly motherfucker in charge of her tattoo, was already waiting for us. They tattooed her, and then lead us to the underground parking garage where my car was waiting. I asked if I could personally thank the man in charge, but I was told that wasn’t possible. I still don’t know who the fuck is behind all this.”

“I think I saw him.”

We all turn at the sound of Simona’s voice, watching her come up the stairs where she’s obviously been hiding and listening in to our conversation. Her face is scrubbed clean, her hair still damp, the sweatpants a couple of inches too short, and she’s so damn beautiful it makes it hard to think. I stand and motion for her to take my seat. Her blue eyes are still wary when she looks at me, but she slowly walks into the room and takes the seat I offer.

“Simona, these are my brothers.” I point them out, telling her their names and then point to Emily, who’s giving her a friendly smile from Roman’s lap. “And this is Emily, Roman’s wife.”

“I know you must be terrified,” Emily says, “but I promise they’re not going to hurt you.”

Simona gives a soft laugh. “So they just buy trafficked women out of the goodness of their hearts?”

“No,” Roman says, tightening his arms around his wife. “We’re not good guys, Simona, but we’re not involved in sex trafficking.”

“Then why buy me?”

I sit down close to Simona, being careful to leave a cushion between us so I don’t make her uncomfortable. She looks over at me, but doesn’t say anything. She also doesn’t scoot further down the couch, which I’m counting as a win.

“My sister was taken over a year ago,” Roman tells her, “and we’ve been trying to get her back ever since. We think the organization that took

you is probably the one that took her. We need to find out who they are so we can rescue her."

"Can you tell us what happened to you?" I ask her.

She sits back further on the couch and puts her socked feet on the edge of the cushion, wrapping her arms around her legs. She looks so small and helpless, and my first instinct is to pull her into my lap. I fight the urge, knowing she wouldn't welcome it right now.

"My parents died in a car wreck last year," she says, and her voice is low but steady. "They were from Romania but moved to America when my mom was pregnant with me. After they died, I decided to travel to Romania. I thought it might make me feel close to them, but it took me a while to actually work up the courage to do it."

Her fingers play a tune along the top of her foot that only she can hear while she says, "I was so stupid."

She lets out a harsh laugh and looks around the room, eyeing my brothers who are all quiet, hanging on every word she's saying for some clue that can help us. Her eyes settle on Emily.

"I ran into a woman on my first day there. I thought she was so sweet and friendly. I looked like the scared, lost tourist, and she kind of took me under her wing. We had lunch, and then she said she wanted to take me to a club, to show me the real Romania."

"What was her name?" Matvey asks.

Simona looks up at the sound of his raspy voice. "Adriana. She was taller than me, long blonde hair, brown eyes, very beautiful, and she had that air about her, you know? Like she was just used to getting her way. We had lunch at this really fancy restaurant, and even though I know I wasn't up to their dress code, she just walked us in like she owned the place, like she knew there was no way in hell they'd turn us away."

She shakes her head, disbelief written all over her face. "I was so stupid. I just wanted to try something new, I guess, come out of my shell a little bit."

"You're not stupid," I tell her. "That's why they chose a woman. They wanted to make you feel safe. If a man had approached you, would you have reacted differently?"

"Well, yeah, I wouldn't have just gone off to some strange club with him."

“Every step of this was orchestrated perfectly, and the goal was always for you to lose. If you’d told her no at any point, she would’ve tried something else. She would’ve told you she wanted to take you sightseeing, led you to an unpopulated area, and then they would’ve just grabbed you off the street.” I keep my eyes on hers. “You were never going to win, Simona. As soon as she saw you, it was already a done deal. They don’t stop once they have a target picked out.”

She gives me a slow nod and then turns back to the others. “They put something in my drink at the club, and before I passed out, one of the men told me that he was going to take some pictures and that I would regret being so trusting.” She lets out a soft laugh. “He was right.”

“Can you tell us anything about him?” Roman asks.

“He was a handsome man in a suit, the same as just about every other guy in that place. Dark hair, dark eyes, a bit of dark stubble on his face, nothing that really stood out except for the cold, dead look in his eyes. I begged him to let me go, and there was just nothing there. I knew that there was nothing I could do to convince him to see me as anything other than a possession, something he could use to make money.”

“Did you hear any names?” Lev asks.

We’re all trying to not bombard her with questions, but we’ve waited so damn long for this. We’re desperate for a clue that could lead us to Alina.

“I asked him his name, but he said it wasn’t important. I didn’t hear any names being said. I thought that he was the boss, but when they lined all the women up, two men came in, and you could just tell,” she says, looking at me. “The whole room felt different when they walked in. You could tell they were the ones who were really in charge. They walked down the line, and I kept my head held high. I shouldn’t have. It was stupid, but I was pissed and scared, and I didn’t want to give them anything else.”

“What did he do?” I ask her.

“He stopped in front of me and smiled, said that he liked to break defiant things and that if he didn’t already have a pet, he’d keep me for himself.”

My hand tightens into a fist at her words, and when she sees my anger, she looks away and hugs herself tighter. I force myself to take a breath and relax.

“They weren’t Romanian. I don’t know what they were, but they weren’t speaking Romanian.”

I look over and meet Matvey's eyes. We've always suspected that there's a Bratva behind all this, but we've never been sure.

"Did it sound like this? Like Russian?" I ask her and then switch to Russian, asking my brothers what they think of all this.

Simona listens while Roman says, "This has to be them. They're too big, too well organized, and they have enough money to operate around the world."

"What if we go to where they held the auction? Maybe someone's still there? We could grab them and torture them for information. Someone has to know something."

The pain and anger in Matvey's voice is what we're all feeling, and the temptation to do what he's suggested is fucking strong, but we can't do it, not yet anyway.

"There's no way in hell anyone worth questioning is still there. All it will do is blow our cover," I tell him.

Roman nods. "He's right. It'll just give us away and ruin everything we've done so far."

Simona cuts in and says, "That sounds like what they were speaking, but I can't be sure. The man who talked to me was tall, dark hair, and blue eyes. He looked so damn normal. I can't get over how fucking normal they all looked. You'd never know they were buying and selling women."

"Any tattoos?" Lev asks.

"I could see one on his hand. It looked like a black feather. I couldn't see the rest of it because of his suit."

"How did you get out of Romania?" Vitaly asks.

"I have no idea," she says, and I can hear the exhaustion in her voice. I know everything is starting to catch up to her. "I thought I was still there, but when I woke up, he told me I was in America."

Matvey leans forward, the hood of his sweatshirt slipping back a bit in his excitement. "You met the boss here?"

"Yeah," she whispers.

Matvey looks around at us and says in Russian, "The fucker is here. He might still be here. Cut off the head of the snake, and it all comes falling down."

"Maybe," I tell him. "We still don't know who the fuck he is."

"We need to go to the club tonight."

I shake my head at him. “Matvey, we can’t. She’s exhausted. I just fucking bought her a couple of hours ago.”

He stands up, growing agitated as he points his finger at her. “If he’s there, then she can identify him.” His dark eyes turn back to meet mine. “This may be our only shot.”

“What’s he saying?”

I look over at Simona, wondering how in the hell I’m going to ask her to do this for us.

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Chapter 4

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Simona

I look up at Danil, the man who bought me, the man who I'm still trying to figure out, and ask again, "What's going on? What is he saying?"

His brother, the one in the hoodie with the intense, dark eyes is looking at me and growling something in Russian. His voice is deeper than the others and raspy sounding, making him seem intimidating, especially with the wild look in his eyes.

Danil turns to me, locking those grey eyes on mine, and I try very hard to not think about how damn good looking he is. He scratches at his stubbled jaw and says, "There's a club that we've been going to that's connected to the group that brought you here. It's how I found out about the auction and got an invite. Matvey wants you to come to the club with us to see if you can identify any of the men."

"What? You want me to go back to them?" I scoot back into the corner of the couch, looking at them like they've lost their damn minds. Emily's giving me a sympathetic look while Roman kisses the top of her head and pulls her closer. It's obvious he's completely in love with her, and she doesn't seem like she's here against her will, which makes me feel a little bit better about the situation. Lev raises a pierced brow at me, waiting to see what I'll do, and Vitaly sighs and rubs a tattooed hand through his hair.

Matvey steps closer. "Please," he says in his thick accent. "She's been gone for over a year. You won't have to do anything, just point them out to us, and then you'll never have to see any of them again."

I look up at him. The hood of his sweatshirt is pulled up, but I can see his face clearly, and there's something in his eyes that has me nodding even as my brain is screaming at me that there's no way in fuck I'm going

anywhere near those jackasses again. I'm not sure what makes me do it, blind fear most likely, but I reach up and grab Danil's hand. He raises a brow in surprise, but he doesn't push me away. He wraps his long fingers around my hand and gives me a soft squeeze.

"Promise me you won't let them get me again."

"I promise." He brings his other hand to our clasped ones, cocooning my hand between his. Leaning closer, he says, "You're safe with me. I won't ever let them touch you again."

"We'll all be there with you," Lev tells her. "You won't be alone for a second."

"Yes, we're all going," Emily says, and Roman looks at her like she's lost her mind.

"Not all of us," he says.

Emily kisses his cheek. "Yes, babe, all of us."

"You're not going into that club, *solnishka*."

Emily looks over at me. "If she's going, then I'm going."

"You're pregnant!" The exasperated tone has Emily lifting a brow at him. He cups her face and kisses the pissed-off frown she's wearing. "Baby, there's no way in hell I'm letting you step foot in that goddamn club."

"It's okay," I say, giving Emily a smile. "Please don't put yourself at risk. Congratulations on the baby, by the way, but please, I'll be fine."

Emily looks like she wants to argue, but when she lets out a resigned sigh, Roman's shoulders relax and he mutters something in Russian.

"Are you talking about me?" she asks him.

He lets out a soft laugh and kisses her. "Just telling them that you're trying to give me a heart attack."

"I think Simona and I should go in alone," Danil says. He's still clutching my hand in his, and I don't try to pull it away. He runs his thumb over the back of my hand as he keeps talking. "It's going to be weird enough that I'm coming to the club right after buying her. I can play it off as just stopping in to show her off, thank them, whatever, but it'll be suspicious if I choose to spend my first night with her at the club with my brothers. You guys can wait in the parking lot, and if we see them in there, then I'll text you."

"He's right," Vitaly says. "No one would spend 3.5 million dollars and then go and drink at the Red Viper."

"Great," Emily says, "then I can wait in the SUV with you guys."

“I think you should stay here,” Roman says.

She pats his cheek and smiles. “It’s bulletproof, and you’ll be with me.” She looks over at Danil. “Do you think I should wear a dress just in case?”

Roman stares at Danil, waiting for his answer.

“Are you trying to drive him insane?” Danil asks her.

She lets out a soft laugh. “Not really, but he’s cute when he gets all protective.”

Roman stands up, taking her with him. “You’re in so much trouble later, *solnishka*.”

She just smiles up at him, and I look away because I feel like I’m intruding on a private moment. My first impression of them was right. They’re very much in love, and it’s definitely not just for show.

“I need to get a dress for Simona,” Emily says.

Roman gives her another kiss before gently setting her down. Danil lets go of my hand, and I have the insane urge to grab it again. I don’t. Instead, I return Emily’s smile and let her guide me away from the others. I take one last look back, seeing Danil’s grey eyes following my every move.

“You’re going to hate what you have to wear,” Emily warns me, “but trust me when I say you’ll fit right in.”

“It can’t be any worse than the dress they had me in. It was completely see-through,” I tell her.

“Okay, that is worse,” she admits.

I follow her down a long hallway and into a large bedroom. The first thing I see is a framed photo of Roman and Emily. It’s like the kind you get in a photo booth, a strip of five small photos, each of them showing their smiling, laughing faces.

“How in the hell did you get involved in all this?” I ask her.

She laughs and walks over to the closet. “My dad’s the mayor, and Roman came to one of his fundraising functions because they’d learned that he was into some seriously shady shit. I’d been suspicious of my dad and his friends for a while, and we sort of ended up teaming up to try and stop them and find Alina.”

Grabbing a dress, she walks back out and says, “He actually saved my ass. I’d gone to the Red Viper to investigate on my own, and he’d found me there. I thought he was going to completely lose his shit. He was so angry that I’d put myself in danger. The only way to protect me was to pretend that I was his pet.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, it was crazy, but it worked. It became too dangerous, though, and now that I’m pregnant, he refuses to let me help.”

“I can’t say I blame him. I wouldn’t want anyone that I care about around these sick fuckers.”

I grab the hanger she holds out to me, noticing the tattoo of Roman’s name on her inner wrist. My own wrist throbs while I eye the tiny, pink dress that looks impossibly small.

“Do you need heels?” she asks.

“No, I’ve got the pair I wore here.” My feet hurt just thinking about having to put them back on again. “Thanks for letting me borrow your clothes.”

“Anytime. Let me get you some makeup too.” When she returns, she reaches out and squeezes my hand. “I know this is weird and that it’s been horrible for you, but I promise you’re safe here.”

“Thanks, Emily.”

She looks towards the hall that leads back to the five Melnikov brothers. “I’m not going to lie and say they’re not into some seriously illegal shit, but the only reason they’re involved in the sex trafficking stuff is to find Alina.”

“I get it. I mean, she’s their sister.”

“Well, technically she’s only Roman’s sister. They’re brothers by choice, not actually related.”

“That makes sense. They don’t really look alike, but they all seem so determined to find Alina, especially Matvey. I’m glad she has them fighting for her, and I really hope they can find her soon. I wouldn’t wish what I went through on anyone, and I wasn’t even with them that long.”

“Matvey’s in love with her, and it’s slowly killing him.” She puts her hand on her stomach. She’s not showing yet, but she’s got that pregnancy glow going on. “We all want her found before the baby’s born.”

“I’ll try my best to spot someone tonight, but there’s no guarantee they’ll be there,” I try and warn her, because I’m beginning to think that everyone’s hope is riding on me, and the weight of it is making it hard to breathe. The truth is, I really just want to crawl into bed and sleep for days. I don’t want to face any of this. I want to just disappear for a while, but I can’t tell them no. They’ve given me no reason to not believe them, and I’m very aware that if these men wanted to hurt me, they could, and I wouldn’t be able to do a damn thing to stop it, but they haven’t. They’re being kind,

and that’s what I hang onto when we walk back into the room and all five of them turn to stare at us.

They’re all looking at me, but it’s Danil’s eyes I focus on. “I need to change and then we can go.”

He nods and watches me as I walk past and go back down the stairs that lead to his room. In the bathroom, I hurry up and change and then put on a little bit of makeup. I don’t put as much effort into it as I probably should, but I’m going to the club, damn it. I kind of feel like I’m doing enough just by agreeing to put my ass back in danger again so quickly.

My hair is a mess, so I go through a few drawers until I find a brush. I smell like Danil. The citrusy smell of his shampoo fills the air around me as I fluff out my hair. I see his bottle of cologne on the counter, and without thinking, I bring it to my nose and take a whiff. The spicy scent immediately puts me back in that room where they gave me the tattoo. I’d been so scared, but Danil had just put me on his lap like it was the most natural thing in the world and caressed my skin, distracting me from my fear. It was comforting, and no matter what happens, I’ll always be grateful to him for that kindness.

When I step out of the bathroom, he’s waiting for me. He’s in the same dark suit he was wearing before, and he has that same leather messenger bag slung across his chest. I’m guessing he’s still wearing the gun too. I don’t ask. I just look up at him and wait for him to speak.

His grey eyes run over me, and I see the way his jaw tightens when he takes in the small, pink dress I’m wearing, and I’m not sure if it’s because he likes what he sees or if it’s because he doesn’t. I look down and run a hand over it like I’m removing a piece of lint that only I can see.

“Should I ask to borrow something else?” I finally ask him.

“What? No, this is perfect,” he quickly says. “I just hate that you have to do this again so soon.”

He steps closer like he’s about to reach for me, but then thinks better of it and stops with only a few inches between us. Without my heels on, he’s a good foot taller than me, and his very presence is intimidating, but I can’t look away.

“You don’t have to do this,” he says. “If it’s too much, just tell me, and I’ll call it off.”

I shake my head. “No, it’s fine. I’d rather go and get it over with. If I can help, then I want to go.” I hesitate before reaching out and running my

fingers over the strap of his bag. “Don’t leave me there.” I mean it to sound like a command, but it comes out as more of a shaky plea.

“Never,” he says, and I can hear the determination in his voice. He runs a finger over my tattoo. “This black viper means that you’re privately owned. The tattoos are very important in the club we’re going to. The black viper means that no one else is allowed to touch you, and if they do, then I have the right to kill them.”

“Would you do that?” I can’t help but ask.

His grey eyes stay on mine when he says without hesitation, “Yes,” and I believe him. I have no doubt that this man would kill without a second thought if anyone dares to touch me tonight, and it’s a damn comforting thought.

“Okay,” I say, letting out a breath. “I’m ready to go then.”

“Simona,” he starts and then lets out a breath, “I’m going to have to treat you differently in the club. Do you understand that?”

“Like how?”

“I can’t show up with you after spending so much money to buy you and then be kind. I have to act like I own you, like I own every part of you. I can’t be hesitant with how I touch you. I need to know you’re okay with that before we do this.”

I think about what he’s saying, trying to understand if there’s a hidden meaning in there. I’ve been to very few nightclubs, and never to anything even close to a strip club or sex club or whatever the fuck kind of club this is, so I have no clue what goes on inside them. My heart speeds up when I start to think of all the things that might be expected of me.

“You’re not going to make me do anything, right?” I feel like a giant idiot when I add, “Like sex or whatever?” To hide my embarrassment I just keep talking, which only makes everything worse. “Because I don’t want to do that. I don’t know what this club is like, but, I mean, are you going to have to prove that you’ve claimed me or whatever? I can’t do that, Danil. I feel stupid enough walking around in this dress. I’m already out of my comfort zone, like big time. I’m not sure how much more I can handle.”

He grabs my upper arms and squeezes them gently. “Just relax,” he says, and I can hear the soothing tone he’s using. It’s the *let’s talk this crazy woman off the ledge* voice, but even knowing this, it doesn’t make it any less comforting.

“I would never make you do something like that,” he says. His thumbs gently run over my skin, making goosebumps break out along my arms. “I just meant that I’m going to need to touch you, put you on my lap, hold you close, that kind of thing, and I can’t be hesitant when I do it.”

I lick my lips and think about what he’s said. “Okay,” I tell him. “If that’s all it will be, then I can do that.”

He nods and gives my arms one last caress before he lets me go so I can put on my heels. As I slip them on and my feet immediately start to ache, I promise myself that I’m going to burn them when all this is said and done and get myself a comfy pair of Converse All Stars. Fuck that, I’m getting several. I want a pair in each color.

Danil notices my grimace and offers me his arm as we walk up the stairs. I take it, leaning on him for support. I’m running on pure fumes and adrenaline at this point. It’s been a long fucking forty-eight hours, and I’m still feeling jet lagged from my initial flight to Romania. Shouldn’t it be canceled out since I’m back in America? If that’s the case, my body didn’t get the memo. I have a feeling Danil’s going to have to carry me out of the club tonight.

The others are already waiting for us when we enter the living room again. The penthouse is gorgeous, not that I expected anything less. If they’ve got the money to shell out 3.5 million like it’s nothing, they’re obviously not hurting for cash. It’s too dark to see what’s beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, but the city is lit up, and I’m guessing it’ll be one hell of a view when the sun’s up.

“Ready?” Vitaly asks. He and Lev and Roman have changed into suits, but Matvey is still wearing his jeans and hoodie. Emily hasn’t changed either, and Roman’s arm is wrapped around her upper chest, holding her body up against his. It’s a protective hold, and I know there’s no way in hell she’ll be leaving the safety of the vehicle tonight, no matter what happens.

“Yeah, we’re ready,” Danil says.

I keep my arm wrapped through his as we walk to the elevator. I’ve never seen a private elevator like this, didn’t even know people could have their own elevators that opened right into their homes. Turns out there’s a lot of things I didn’t know about, some of which I wish I was still ignorant of. We all manage to cram in, and even with my tall heels, I feel like I’m being swallowed up by the men around me. They tower over me and Emily, but instead of feeling scared, I feel safe. There’s no way in hell anything’s

getting through this wall of muscle. I grip Danil's forearm tighter, and he places his hand over mine, giving it a soft squeeze.

When the elevator opens up onto the parking garage, Matvey walks over to a black Camaro with Lev while the rest of us get into a black SUV that is apparently bulletproof, because that's a fucking normal thing for someone to have. Roman drives with Emily in the passenger seat and the rest of us get in the back. I sit between Vitaly and Danil.

"You sure you want to go in alone?" Vitaly asks once we're on the main road.

"I think it'll look less suspicious," Danil says. "I'm going to try to make this as fast as possible."

Vitaly gives me a playful wink. "That's what he tells all the ladies."

A laugh slips out before I can stop it. This is not a lighthearted situation at all or a topic that's in any way funny, and I'm pretty sure that's exactly why Vitaly cracked a joke. We're all wound up too tightly, and some of that tension eases off a little when Roman also laughs and Danil mutters something in Russian that has Vitaly smiling even bigger.

Several minutes later, we pull into a small club, and it's not at all what I was expecting. It's pretty nondescript, and this area of the city looks shady as fuck, but the parking lot is full of expensive cars. No one would park a Jaguar in this area and then just leave it unsupervised for hours at a time, and yet they've all chosen to do just that, and not a single one of them looks vandalized in any way.

Roman parks next to a red Lamborghini and Matvey takes the space next to us. Danil gives my hand another squeeze before saying, "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," I tell him. "It's not going to be for long."

"No, it won't be," he assures me before opening the door.

"Text if you need us," Roman tells him.

"Will do," Danil says, stepping out and then offering me his hand to help me down. Before we walk off, he gives the top of Matvey's car a couple of soft smacks, letting him know we're on our way in.

I eye the building in front of us. It's bland with nothing but a small sign that reads *Red Viper* above the front door. There's a very large bouncer standing out front, looking straight at us. Nothing about this place screams, *Come on in for a cold one!* This place must operate on word of mouth

alone, and I'm guessing not even that is enough to get you through the front door.

"Okay, Simona, time to put on a show," Danil whispers.

"Okay," I whisper, and as soon as the word's left my mouth, Danil's entire demeanor changes. I feel him grow distant beside me, even though he hasn't moved at all. There's a hardness to him, though, that wasn't there before. I can't say I care for it. His hand reaches up and cups the back of my neck in a possessive grip that I would despise if anyone but him was doing it.

We stop in front of the bouncer, who's eyeing me like I'm nothing more than a hole to fuck. I can't say I care for that either. Danil tightens his grip on me.

"Hey, Danil, I heard you made a big purchase today," the bouncer says.

"I did," Danil says with a soft laugh. "Just wanted to stop by to show David and offer my personal thanks."

The bouncer leers at me and then gives me a wink. "She's a pretty one, that's for sure."

"She is," Danil agrees. After a few seconds, he asks, "You gonna let us in, Robbie?"

Robbie laughs. "Yeah, sorry, just thinking about your new pet."

"Make sure that's all you do."

Robbie pales at Danil's tone and raises a hand. "Yeah, man, of course. No touching. I know the rules."

As soon as he steps his large frame aside, Danil leads me into the dark club, and my whole body stills. Sleazy is the first word that comes to mind. It's a strip club, but that's not all it is. There are girls, fully naked girls, at the poles, but there are also others giving lap dances throughout the club, and the way the men are pawing at them makes me feel sick to my stomach. I'm pretty sure this kind of thing would never be allowed in a real strip club.

Danil leans down to whisper in my ear. "Just breathe, *sladkaya*."

I have no idea what that word means, but I like the sound of it. It's something nice that I can cling to in this filthy place. Danil leads me through the throng of perverted men, keeping his hand on the nape of my neck the whole time. His thumb brushes along my skin, soothing me and encouraging me to not lose my shit just yet. I look around the darkened room, trying to spot anyone who looks familiar, but all I can see are

unfamiliar faces. The men run their eyes over me like the bouncer did, but Danil was telling the truth about the tattoo. I notice their eyes actively look to my left wrist as if trying to sort out if I can be shared, and as soon as they spot the black ouroboros, they look away. I'm no longer worth their time, and that is perfectly fine with me.

When we get to the VIP section, Danil smiles at the topless woman guarding the entrance. "Hey, Danil," she purrs, and I don't like it, not one little bit. "Want another dance, baby?"

Awesome. I try very hard to not notice her incredible body, and I refuse to make comparisons between the two of us because this night is already depressing enough. Danil's thumb runs over my skin again.

"No, thanks," Danil tells her, and I feel my body relax a bit. "I just dropped by to see David."

The beautiful woman gives him a pouty smile as she unhooks the rope. "Let me know if you change your mind, baby."

I look up and meet Danil's eyes, but his expression is unreadable. I swear I catch a flash of guilt, but it's gone before I can be sure.

"Danil," a man calls from one of the booths in the corner. He waves us over, and the man stands as soon as we're closer. "I didn't expect you to come in tonight." He looks at me and gives a soft laugh. "I heard you broke a record today."

"I did." Danil pulls me closer and splays his other hand along my lower stomach, pulling me closer to him. My back presses against his hard chest as my ass seems to mold to his body, like it was always supposed to be right here, nestled between his strong thighs. "Thought I'd bring her by to let you see her and to offer my thanks in person. I really appreciate the invite today, David."

David smiles and motions for us to take a seat as another man walks over. This man has a woman on his arm, and the only thing she's wearing is a sparkly, tiny thong. Danil sits down and grabs my hips, pulling me down into his lap. Even though I'd been in his lap for the tattoo, this feels very different. Then, I could tell he was trying to give me some space to put me at ease, but right now he isn't allowing that. His hand rests on my thigh as his other one strokes my back, and when I work up the courage to look at him, he leans closer. The short stubble brushes against my cheek as he brings his mouth to my ear.

"Easy, *sladkaya*. It's just like we talked about."

“Seems like you two are getting along nicely,” David says.

The other man laughs, and when I look over, I see the woman is grinding away on his lap while he stares at me and says, “She’s a pretty little thing.”

I very much want to get the hell out of this place. Danil feels me tense and wraps an arm around me. He kisses my cheek before he looks over at the two men.

“She is, Aaron,” Danil says to the man getting the lap dance. He brings his hand around so he can squeeze the curve of my ass. “I’m very pleased with my purchase.”

I’m having a hard time facing the two jackasses across from us, so I lean into Danil and rest my head on his broad shoulder. He keeps his hand where it’s at, and I can’t help but notice that his splayed-out hand is also keeping me partly hidden from view, and it makes me wonder if he’s doing it on purpose or if he just really wanted to grab my ass.

“I was hoping the men responsible for this auction might be here tonight,” Danil continues. “I’d like to personally thank them for delivering such a fine product.”

“They’re not here,” David says. “They’ve already left the country.”

I let out a sigh at the bad news, and Danil brings one hand to my back, tapping out a soft rhythm against my skin. It doesn’t feel like he’s playing a song like I do, but more like he’s letting me know that he’s noticed what I do when I’m nervous. His forearm is resting on my thighs because his hand is still firmly on my ass, and when I bring a hand down and play a quick melody with my left hand, I see the side of his mouth quirk up in a small smile.

“That’s too bad,” Danil says while I start playing a song on his arm. “When do you expect them back?”

“They never stay here for long,” Aaron says. “They travel all over the place. They make deliveries here every few months, and then they’re off again.” Aaron lets out a harsh laugh. “We don’t even get to meet them.”

“There’s no reason for any of us to meet them,” David says, and even I can hear the shift in his tone.

Danil laughs. “Not even if it’s to thank them for the tightest goddamn pussy I’ve ever felt?”

The men share a laugh while Danil’s fingers tap along my back, reminding me that we’re still playing a part. The problem is, it doesn’t

really feel like a part. I was still sold a few hours ago, and now I'm sitting in the lap of the man who bought me. The tattoo on my wrist is proof that I'm not really playing a part at all. I'm a possession, Danil's possession, and I have no idea what that means beyond tonight. Is he ever going to let me go?

My fingers stop and I slouch even more against him, suddenly exhausted for so many different reasons. Danil rubs circles along my back while the men talk about the auction and Aaron gets his lap dance. I'm barely able to keep my eyes open when I hear Danil say, "We need to get going. I just wanted to offer my thanks in person."

He stands up, easily taking me with him. He holds me bridal style while David laughs and says, "You've really worn her out."

"I'm not even close to being done with her. Poor thing's going to have a long night." The laugh he gives is hard and cold, and if I didn't know him, I'd believe it. I wouldn't doubt for a second that he's a cruel sexual sadist who gets off on buying and raping women. It's terrifying to see how easily he can morph from one thing to the next, and I can't help but wonder if this is the truth of it. Maybe the whole good guy act is just a show.

"Enjoy your new pet," David says while Aaron laughs and smacks the grinding ass in his lap.

"Oh, I will," Danil says before turning and carrying me back through the crowd.

As we're leaving the VIP section, the woman who'd first let us in gives another cutesy giggle. "Come back soon, Danil, and we can spend some time in the back together."

"Thanks, but that's what I have her for," he says, looking down at me.

"But you could have us both."

I can't see her, but I can hear the pout in her voice, and I have no doubt she's giving him some serious fuck-me eyes right about now.

"I'm not interested," he says, walking past her and back into the crowd. He looks down at me, and sighs. "I'm sorry. We can talk about all this later. I know it's confusing."

Before I can say anything, a man walks up and smacks Danil on the back. "Hey, I recognize her. You're the one who set the bidding record."

Danil's jaw tenses, but he turns to give the guy a smile. "Were you there?"

The man smiles at him and runs a hand through his thinning blond hair. “Fuck yeah I was.” He leans closer like it’s *let’s share our perverted secrets time* and says, “Bought myself a little something while I was there, too.” He laughs again, making the wrinkles around his eyes stand out even more. This dude has got to be someone’s grandpa, and fuck if that isn’t all kinds of messed up.

“I didn’t spend near as much as you did, though,” he continues. “My name’s Tom, by the way, and I don’t mean to hold you up, I just wanted to extend an invitation. I’m having a little party at my house this weekend.” He looks at me and smiles. “Bring your pet, of course.”

“Who all will be there?” Danil asks.

The guy shrugs, and because he’s clearly had a few, it comes off looking clumsy, especially when paired with the slightly drunken hand wave he gives. “Mostly regulars from this club, but there will be several that were at today’s auction.”

“I thought everything was supposed to be anonymous,” Danil says.

Tom laughs. “That’s just at the auctions so the big guys can cover their asses and keep their reputations intact.” Tom waves his arms around like an idiot. “We’re a close-knit group here, though, and everyone sorta knows everyone, especially when you bring your pet in that we all saw on the stage.” He gives me a sloppy, drunken wink.

“Mind if I bring some of my brothers to this party?”

“Sure, sure,” he says. “Bring whoever you want.”

He rattles off the date and time along with his address before raising his glass to someone at the bar. “I gotta go, but I’ll see you two soon.”

Danil watches him walk off while his fingers start tapping against my thigh again. I do another scan of the room, trying to find anyone who looks familiar, but I’ve never seen any of them. After a few minutes, I give a soft shake of my head and we leave the club and start walking back towards the SUV.

“You can put me down,” I tell him.

“Your feet hurt,” is all he says.

When we’re only a few feet away, Vitaly opens the door and Danil puts me inside before taking the spot next to me. Matvey and Lev walk over to hear the news.

“I see you love the club as much as we do,” Vitaly says, looking at the expression I’m wearing. “We all have that thrilled look on our face when

we exit that fucked-up building."

I smile at Vitaly and then look at Matvey, knowing he's dying for some good news and wishing like hell I could give it to him. "I didn't see anyone I recognized. I'm sorry."

His face gives nothing away. The same tortured look is in his dark eyes, and I hate that I couldn't lessen it for him.

"You did great," Danil says. "You may not have recognized anyone, but we got an invite to a private party, and it's going to be filled with men who are heavily involved in all this, several of them were at the auction today."

"You're not going to that thing alone," Roman says, looking back at us.

"Relax," Danil says with a small laugh. "He said it would be fine if I brought some of my brothers."

"You're not going without me," Emily tells Roman, and I can see the struggle written all over him. When he hesitates, she says, "What are you going to do if they offer you a woman?"

"Tell her to get the fuck away from me," he says without hesitation.

She raises a brow as if he's just proven her point. Looking back at the rest of the guys, she asks, "Think that might raise a red flag or two?"

Vitaly laughs. "Just a few." He grins at Lev. "Looks like it's me and you again."

"You always take me to the best places," Lev deadpans.

Vitaly's smile grows. "I do, don't I? I'm just sweet like that."

Lev looks like he's about to tell him to fuck off, but Vitaly cuts in and says, "I'm fucking starving, and there's no way in hell Simona isn't hungry too."

As if on cue, my stomach growls loud enough for everyone to hear. Danil gives my thigh a soft squeeze. "Shit, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"We'll hit a drive-thru," Roman says, already starting the car.

"We'll follow you," Matvey says, walking back to his Camaro with Lev.

"Thanks," I tell them.

"What are you in the mood for?" Vitaly asks.

"I could really go for a greasy cheeseburger."

He laughs and looks over at Danil. "I like her. Greasy cheeseburgers and fries it is."

Roman finds a place close by, and when they ask me what I want, I don't hesitate. I haven't eaten anything all damn day, and I'm starving. They're all kind enough to not laugh when I order a large meal with a

vanilla shake and then ask them to throw in a cookie for dessert. Might as well go all in.

I smile when Emily says, “Ooh, that sounds good. I want that too.”

Roman laughs and kisses the back of her hand. “Whatever my baby wants.”

We bring the food back and eat it together. The main living area is open, so it’s one big space for the kitchen, dining area, and living room. The wall of floor-to-ceiling windows spreads the entire length of the large room, and I can’t imagine how much they paid for this place. Danil sits next to me, making sure I have everything I need. I’m too hungry and tired to talk, so I just eat while I watch this odd family I’ve been brought into.

The brothers laugh and joke around, and they even end up getting a few small smiles out of Matvey, who’s sitting right across from me. I notice the scars on his hands when he takes a bite out of his cheeseburger and the tattoos that have been inked over them. I look away before he can catch me staring.

When I’ve cleaned my plate, Danil hands me my cookie. I push it aside with a groan. “I can’t,” I tell him. Usually, I’d be able to do it no problem, but after going so long without food and then basically inhaling the large meal, I’m whooped. I can’t do another bite of anything.

I see Matvey eyeing my cookie, so I hold it out to him. “Do you want it?”

He takes it, the corner of his mouth curling up in a very small smile. “Thanks.”

“I think you meant to say that he has to share it with me,” Vitaly says, holding a hand out to Matvey. “Right, Simona?”

“What about me?” Lev asks.

Matvey ignores them and takes a bite while I shake my head, making it clear I’m not getting involved in this cookie war.

“Emily?” Vitaly asks, looking over at her. “Can I have half your cookie?”

Roman laughs. “She finished that thing like five minutes ago. She didn’t even offer me any.”

Emily laughs. “Sorry, babe.”

He leans down and kisses her. “Don’t worry, *solnishka*. I’ll find something sweet to eat later.”

Vitaly looks at me and rolls his eyes. “We can’t take them anywhere.” He looks at Roman. “We all know what you’re talking about.”

“It would be really embarrassing if you didn’t,” Roman says with another laugh as he pulls Emily into his lap.

Emily laughs and says, “Relax, there are some cupcakes in the kitchen.” She meets my eyes and says, “They’re completely addicted to sugar. I’ve never seen anything like it. Seriously, if you ever need to bribe any of them, just bake something sweet. They’ll be putty in your hands.”

“Hey, no telling house secrets,” Vitaly says around the giant bite of cupcake he’s just taken.

I laugh, but when it turns into a yawn, Danil stands and holds his hand out for me. “Come on, you need to sleep.”

I take his hand, letting him help me up, wondering how the sleeping arrangement is going to work. I say goodnight to the rest of them and follow him back down the stairs to his room, hesitating in the doorway of his bedroom. He puts his messenger bag down at his large desk that’s filled with all kinds of expensive and complicated-looking equipment and then takes off his suit jacket. I try very hard to not notice how built he is, but it’s impossible to miss. Even with the white dress shirt still on, I can see the broad shoulders and muscled pecs, and I’m willing to bet good money that he has one hell of a set of abs. When I feel my body start to respond, I turn away and rush for the bathroom so I can get ready for bed. I need sleep. My brain is obviously addled and confused. Things will be a lot clearer when I wake up. They have to be, because there’s no way in hell I can start developing feelings for the guy who bought me.

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Chapter 5

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Danil

I watch Simona run for the bathroom—dark hair bouncing at her shoulders, round ass cheeks moving beneath that tiny dress that's been driving me fucking crazy, and when she turns to give me one last look, those big, blue eyes nearly do me in.

With a sigh, I sit on the edge of my bed and rest my head in my hands. I'm uncomfortably hard, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it. It had taken every ounce of willpower I possess to not get hard at the club. I'd counted every fucking thing I could think of, and even then it had been nearly impossible. I hadn't wanted to scare her, though, and the knowledge that she wouldn't have welcomed it is the only thing that kept it from happening. There's no stopping it now, though.

Needing to do something, I get up and pull back the covers for her before grabbing one of my T-shirts from the closet. Giving a soft knock at the door, I say, "I have a T-shirt you can sleep in if you want."

She pokes her head out and eyes the shirt. Reaching out, she grabs it with a quick "thanks," and then shuts the door in my face. While she's in there, I kick off my shoes and change into a pair of workout shorts. I've just taken my shirt off when I hear a soft gasp from behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I see her standing in the doorway with her eyes locked on my bare upper body. I keep the front of my body angled away from her so she can't see the erection straining at my pants and quickly put a shirt on, discreetly adjusting myself before I step out of the closet. My cock is pressed against my stomach, my waistband trying like hell to keep it in check, but it's a temporary solution. This is going to need to be dealt with and soon.

I’m debating whether or not I should take a quick shower and jerk off when she says, “I can sleep on the couch.”

“You’re not sleeping on the damn couch,” I tell her, offended by the very idea of it. “You can have the bed.”

She eyes the king-sized bed. “That doesn’t seem fair. I don’t want to take your bed from you.”

“You’re not. I’m offering it.”

I can tell she wants to fight me on it, but her exhaustion wins. She climbs in and pulls the covers up to her chin, sinking into the pillow as she curls up onto her side. I go into the bathroom so I can brush my teeth, and when I come out, I’m expecting her to be asleep, but her blue eyes follow me as I walk across the room. I’m about to grab my laptop and leave when her voice stops me.

“Wait.”

I turn back to look at her, and she look so fucking small and scared, and it breaks something inside of me, some wall I hadn’t even known I’d put up. The urge I have to take care of her and protect her is not something I’m familiar with. I’ve never cared about a woman before, not like this. I love Alina, and I’ll never stop looking for her, but it’s not the same thing. Staring at Simona, I want to climb into my bed and bury myself inside this woman and never fucking leave. I don’t ever want to see this scared look on her face ever again. I want her to know and trust that I will always protect her, no matter what.

Her voice is barely more than a whisper when she reaches out her hand to me and says, “Will you stay in here with me?”

Before I can answer, she quickly adds, “I mean, just to sleep.” There’s another pause and then, “I don’t want to be alone.”

I walk to the bed and get under the covers because I’m helpless to deny her anything. To pretend otherwise is pointless. Lying down, I ignore my cock and try to focus on the sound of her soft breaths.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“You don’t have to thank me, *sladkaya*,” I say, because somewhere along the line calling her sweetheart just became second nature. “Try and sleep. I’ll stay here as long as you need me to.” I turn my face so I can see her. She stares back at me, eyes half closed and fighting sleep, hands fisting the blanket as she keeps it held close to her chin, and I want so badly to close the distance and wrap my arms around her.

“I know you’re scared,” I tell her, “but you’re safe here. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

She gives a small nod. “What happens now, though? Are you just going to keep me forever?”

I want to say yes, because I have no intention of letting her go, but I don’t. Instead I say, “We need your help. I won’t lie to you about that, but I would never keep you here against your will.”

She nods her head as her eyes drift closed. Before she falls asleep, she reaches a hand out, and when I grasp it in mine, she lets out a soft sigh.

Knowing I only have seconds left before she’s completely knocked out, I ask, “Do you play the piano?”

“Yes,” she whispers, her voice heavy with sleep.

I smile and run my fingers over hers. I want to ask her what music she likes, what she’s always playing against her skin when she’s nervous, and what tune she played on my arm earlier at the club, but she’s already in a deep sleep, and I don’t want to wake her. I keep her hand held in mine and watch her sleep.

It doesn’t take long before the nightmares come. At first it’s just soft movement, a leg that twitches, a shake of her head, her fingers jerking against mine, but then she starts to really thrash. I run my hand over her, telling her she’s safe, but her body doesn’t calm.

It’s the strangled cry that has me quickly scooping her into my arms. I hold her against me, brushing her hair aside so I can cover her face in kisses while she sobs against my chest. I taste the salt of her tears on my tongue as I whisper against her skin, first in Russian and then in English, “It’s okay, *sladkaya*. You’re safe. I’ve got you now.”

I repeat it over and over again until she finally relaxes against me. Her breathing is ragged, and her voice hoarse, when she says, “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.” I kiss her forehead and brush my thumb over her cheek, wiping away the tears. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She’s quiet for so long that I start to think she’s fallen back asleep, but then she says, “In my dream I was back in that room with the doctor.”

My whole body stills. “What doctor?”

“The man who drugged me, when I woke up, he took me into an exam room. It was filthy and scary looking, and there was this older man. I

begged him to help me, but he didn't speak English. He wouldn't have helped me even if he had understood me."

She lets out another shaky breath and starts to tap out a rhythm on my chest. "The doctor examined me. They wanted to do some kind of fucked-up virginity test."

I keep my movements soft, even as every part of me grows hard. The rage is right below the surface, but now's not the time for it to come out, so I keep stroking her hair and kissing her soft skin.

"But then," she starts and then stops as her fingers move faster and the tears start again.

"Did he hurt you?"

She nods her head. "He fingered me while the man who took me held me down on the table, and then he started touching himself." She's sobbing again by the time she says, "He came on my thigh, and I wanted to kill him, Danil. I've never wanted to hurt anyone, but I wanted to kill them both."

"You won't need to, because I'm going to do it for you. I promise, Simona, I'm going to kill that fucker for what he did to you. I'm going to kill them all for you."

I can tell she's still exhausted and nearly cried herself back to sleep, so I don't say anything else. I just hold her against my chest and stroke her hair while her fingers slow down before eventually stopping whatever piece of music they were playing. Not wanting to let her go, I keep her in my lap for several more minutes before finally putting her beside me.

Even though I should be online searching for clues, I can't bring myself to get up. I wrap my arm around her and tuck her much smaller body up against mine. Burying my face in her hair, I breathe in the scent of her, loving that it's mixed with the smell of my shampoo and soap. For the first time in my life, I spoon a woman in my bed and fall asleep beside her, and it's the most peaceful sleep I've ever had. I don't wake up until I feel her moving against me, trying to wiggle free.

My first instinct is to tighten my grip on her. With my eyes still closed, I mumble in Russian for her to stop moving her perfect ass, but it's too late, the damage is most definitely done. I know the second she feels my cock because her whole body freezes and I hear her suck in a quick breath.

"Danil," she whispers.

I let out a sigh and bury my face against her neck, allowing myself one last breath of her before I kiss her skin and put some distance between us.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her. “I’m not trying to scare you or make you feel uncomfortable.” I drag a hand over my face, scratching at the stubble I need to shave. I give her an apologetic smile. “I’m afraid I have no control over it, not now anyway.”

“Why not now?”

She looks at me, and I almost moan at how damn delicious she looks with her hair messed up and her blue eyes looking at me with the perfect mix of curiosity and desire. I’m not exactly sure how honest I should be right now, so I settle on a partial truth.

“Because your perfect ass was wiggling up against me.”

She looks away, but not before I see the want in her eyes. When she raises her hand to tuck a strand of hair behind her ears, I see how red her wrist is.

“Fuck,” I say, reaching for her arm and grabbing it before she realizes what I’m doing. “I forgot to put medicine on this last night.”

Getting out of bed, she watches me as I walk to the bathroom. It’s when I come back out that her eyes widen. My cock still hasn’t gone down, and it’s done listening to anything I have to say. I resign myself to the fact that it’s just going to be like this until I can shower and get rid of it myself.

I sit on the edge of the bed and hold my hand out. She puts her hand in mine, trying to not make it obvious that she’s staring at my dick, but she most definitely is. I put some antibiotic ointment on my finger and gently rub it onto her skin.

“Thanks for last night, Danil.”

I meet her blue eyes and give her a wink. “Anytime. I’m pretty good with night terrors. Matvey has them sometimes.” I give a soft laugh. “I handle his a little differently, though.”

“Why does he have night terrors?”

“Lots of reasons,” I tell her. “He was in a fire when he was younger. He tried to save his mom and sister but couldn’t get to them in time.”

“I’m sorry, that’s terrible. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s okay. You should know about them in case you hear him screaming at night. I wouldn’t want it to scare you, and he wouldn’t want that either.”

“Emily said that he’s in love with Alina.”

“He is,” I tell her, “and this is slowly killing him.”

Turning her hand over, I rub the ointment along her inner wrist. Ernst may have been a sick, ugly bastard, but there’s no denying he’s a skilled

tattoo artist. It's bad enough she had to get one, but at least it's well done.

When I'm finished, I keep her hand in mine, not wanting to let her go. Her blue eyes meet mine, and I want so badly to close the distance, but I don't. I wait to see what she'll do. I try to hide my disappointment when she pulls her hand back.

"I should get dressed," she says, climbing out of bed. My shirt hits her mid-thigh, and I can't pull my eyes from her legs. I don't trust myself right now, so I keep my ass on the bed, knowing if I stand up, I'm going to be grabbing onto her and I may very well never let go.

I'm expecting her to go into the bathroom, but she stays where she's at, hesitating. I watch her bare feet, the pink-painted toes digging into the carpet before she makes a decision and takes a step forward. Reaching out, she cups my face and tilts me up so she can see me.

"Did you mean what you said last night?"

"I meant every word I said to you last night."

"You're going to kill them?"

"Yes."

"Just like that?" she searches my face, and I know she's wondering what kind of monster I am.

"Just like that," I tell her, letting her see me for who I am. I'm a man who's killed before and will kill again, and I won't feel even the slightest twinge of regret about it. "They hurt you, so I'm going to kill them."

"Why do you care?"

I reach up and drag my thumb along her cheek. "I just do, *sladkaya*."

Her breath hitches when I drag my finger along her jawline. "What does that word mean?"

I give a soft laugh. "I'll tell you some other time."

She looks like she wants to argue, but instead she says, "Thanks for taking care of me, and I'm sorry again about last night. I'm guessing that's not how you envisioned things after spending so much money on me."

I shake my head before she's even finished talking. "I will always take care of you, no matter what, and I didn't go to that auction with the intention of buying someone I was going to fuck."

The look on her face lets me know I've said the wrong damn thing. She quickly says, "That's not what I meant. I mean, I didn't think that you wanted to sleep with me, or whatever, I just meant that I'm sorry it was such a shitty night for you."

Her hands are still cupping my face, so I turn my head and kiss her palm. “That’s not what I meant. I didn’t go there to buy a woman. I was never going to force myself on someone. I went there to save someone, and I was hoping they’d be able to help us by giving us some information.”

“Why me?” She whispers. “Why did you pick me?”

“I was sent a file of photos before the auction took place, and I looked at them over and over again. I couldn’t choose. I couldn’t bring myself to pick one woman out of all of them, but when I got there, they had added one more photo to the line-up.”

I look up at her. “Yours.” I give a soft laugh. “I couldn’t look away. Once I saw your face it was a done deal. I knew you were the one I had to bet on.”

“I was the last one, though. What if the other guy had gone higher? You could’ve lost your chance to get anyone.”

“That was never going to happen. I would’ve paid anything for you. He was never going to win.”

“You act like you have all the money in the world.”

“I do, and I would’ve spent it all to save you.” This time when I caress her cheek, she leans into my touch. “I didn’t have a bad night last night, just so you know. It was the greatest night of sleep I can ever remember having. I usually don’t sleep so great, but last night I got to sleep with a beautiful woman tucked up against me.” I smile up at her. “Not a bad night at all.”

“I’m guessing you could have a beautiful woman in your bed any damn night you wanted,” she says, shaking her head at me like she doesn’t believe a word I’ve just said.

“I don’t invite women into my bed, *sladkaya*. No one’s ever slept here but you.”

She studies me, probably waiting for me to laugh, proof that I’m teasing her, but I don’t. I keep my eyes on hers, letting her see the truth of what I’m saying.

“I find that very hard to believe.”

I give a small shrug. “This is my personal space, and I don’t like people invading it.”

“I could’ve slept on the couch,” she whispers.

“I didn’t want you to. I wanted you in here.” I kiss her inner wrist. “In my bed with me.”

Her lips part, and I can see how blown her pupils are. I'm about two seconds away from pulling her down into my lap when she takes a step back and says, "I need to get dressed."

I watch her walk into the bathroom, groaning and lying back on the bed as soon as the door is shut. My cock throbs, and I desperately want to jerk off, but no way in fuck am I going to risk her walking out and catching me with my dick in my hand. I count the seconds, and when I hit three minutes, I get up and go to my computer. It doesn't take long before I'm immersed in the depressing world that I'll be more than happy to leave behind once all this is finished. On the plus side, it quickly killed my erection, so at least I can sit comfortably. I've just stumbled upon a new set of photos when I hear Simona let out a soft gasp from behind me.

"Fuck," I groan, quickly minimizing the screen. I look back at her pale face and wide eyes. It's always a surprise the first time you see photos like these. Reading about it is one thing, but seeing it? That's completely different. You can never unsee it, and the photos haunt you long after you've stopped looking at them.

"I'm sorry. I didn't hear you come out."

"Why are you looking at that shit?"

I sigh and wave a hand at the three large screens in front of me. "This is what I do. I'm good with computers, so it's my job to dig around and try to find information. The others don't know how to do it, not like I can anyway."

"How do you do it? How can you stand looking at photos like that?"

"Because I don't have a choice," I tell her. "What you just saw? That's nothing compared to the shit I've had to pour through over the last year, but I can't stop. What if the next photo I see is Alina? I can't give up until we've found her."

She comes to stand next to me. "Show me the photos from my auction."

When I hesitate, she looks down at me. "Please, Danil. I need to see them."

My fingers fly over the keyboard, and when I'm back on the dark web and maneuvered to where I need to be, I pull up the photos. There are twenty-one now, so someone must've added her photo in at some point. Men can comment on them, and when I try to scroll up so she can't see them, she puts her hand on mine, stopping me.

"No, I want to see them."

I think about telling her no, but she has a right to see whatever the fuck she wants, so I sit back and let her look. She leans over, putting her hands on my desk, and after a few minutes, she lowers herself into my lap and reaches for my mouse, clicking on the next photo. Usually I'd rip the throat out of anyone who dared to touch my computer, but with her, I just sit back and let her do whatever she wants. It doesn't even make me nervous to give her the control.

"They all look so scared," she whispers, staring at the young woman's face on the monitor. "And drugged." She scrolls through the comments and turns to face me. "How can they like this? I don't understand. Who could look at these photos and get turned on?"

"There's a lot of sick fucks out there. I've been forced to be around these bastards for so long now, and I still don't understand it. They like the power, but it's more than that. I'm a bit of a control freak myself, but I don't get off on this sort of thing. They don't look at these pictures and see a human being. They see something they can own, something they can break, and they can't fucking get enough of it."

She thinks about what I've said as she turns back to the screen and keeps scrolling through. Eventually, she stops reading the comments, and just focuses on the pictures. She's almost to her photo, and before she clicks on it, I lean closer and wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her tighter against me.

"Oh my god," she whispers when her face fills the screen. When she moves for the mouse, I put my hand over hers, gently stopping her.

"Please don't read them."

"Do you know what they say?"

"No, the last time I looked on here, your photo hadn't been added yet, but I can guess what they're going to say, and nothing good is going to come from reading them, Simona. Please don't do that to yourself."

"I want to know."

"If you read them, then I read them, and I'm not sure I can handle it." I rest my forehead against her shoulder, breathing in the scent of her. "I already want to kill them all. I'm not sure how much rage one person can handle before they just completely lose it." I kiss her shoulder. "I feel like I'm very close to finding out, though."

"Why do you care so much?"

Her eyes stay on her photo when she asks it, and I follow her gaze, seeing the face that first caught my attention, the pain and terror in her blue eyes, but also the defiance that still shines through, the boldness that they couldn't completely take from her.

"I just do," I tell her. "I feel very protective of you. I can't really explain why."

When she turns back to look at me, I add, "I knew the second I saw you that I couldn't leave that building without you. I would've killed them all to get you."

"This is going to sound all kinds of fucked up, but I'm really glad you bought me."

I can't help but laugh, even though there's really nothing funny about any of this.

"I'm fully aware of what would be happening to me right now if anyone else had won the bid for me."

I close my eyes at the image, because she has an idea of what would've happened to her. I have months of photos floating around my head that let me know exactly what would've happened. The men who win auctions will often post videos and photos from the day after. They like to brag about how bruised the girls are, how torn, and how terrified. The very idea of it has me tightening my grip on her.

"Try not to think about it," I tell her, but really it's for both of us.

"We're going to that party tomorrow night, right?"

"I would like you to go with me, yes, but I'm not going to force you."

"Thank you for saying that, but I'll go as long as you promise to not leave my side for even a second."

"Never," I tell her. I kiss her shoulder again. "Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"Okay, give me just a few minutes, and we can get some breakfast."

She stands up, and I grab my laptop, pulling up the site I want. Making sure I'm signed in, I put it on the bed next to where she's sat down.

"Pick out anything you need, okay? All my information is saved, so just go ahead and order whatever you want."

"Wow, aren't you worried that I'll snoop around or do something to mess up your nice system?"

I laugh. "What kind of hacker would I be if I couldn't even protect my own computer?"

She smiles and lays on her stomach with the laptop in front of her, legs bent behind her, feet in the air and ankles crossed. I'd give just about anything to see this exact position but with her naked.

Forcing myself away, I grab some clothes and head into the bathroom. I quickly get in the shower. With the image fresh in my mind of her on my bed with her ankles crossed and her ass looking fucking phenomenal, I grip my cock as soon as I step under the hot spray. Bracing one hand against the tiled wall, I stroke myself in a rhythm that quickly has me gritting my teeth. I remember how goddamn good it had felt to have her ass wiggling against my cock this morning, the sweet scent of her when I bury my nose in her neck, and the heat in her blue eyes when she'd looked at me.

My muscles tense right before I come, and when the orgasm hits me, I growl her name and slam the side of my fist against the tiles. "Fuck!" I growl, shooting my seed and wishing like hell it was all going inside her. I lazily fist my cock while my body comes down, and when I'm thinking straight again, I start to question just how loud I was. I strain to hear anything beyond the sound of the water, but there's nothing, it's a deafening silence that makes me think she most definitely heard me growl out that last fuck or maybe even her name.

Goddammit.

I hurry and wash myself up before toweling off and getting dressed. The silence feels even heavier as I replay the groan I'd given. It seems loud as fuck in my memory, but I still cling to the hope that it's getting exaggerated in my mind.

Bracing myself for the worst, I open the bathroom door to find her in the same position. Her cheeks are flushed, and when she meets my eyes, she immediately looks away.

Yeah, she definitely heard me jerking off.

I debate the best way to handle this, and finally just laugh. Surprised, she turns to face me, and when I see her lips quirk up, I laugh even harder.

"Sorry, *sladkaya*. I didn't mean for you to hear that." I run a hand through my hair, feeling a little embarrassed for the first time in a very long time. "This is a little awkward."

She gives a soft laugh and sits up, handing me back my computer. "Thank you. I ordered a few things."

Figuring she wants to just ignore all this, I take my computer back and set it on my desk. "Ready to eat?"

“Sure.”

When we get to the kitchen, the only one around is Lev, who’s just finished his workout and is drinking a large protein shake.

“Morning, Simona.”

She smiles at him and follows me to the coffeepot. “Morning.”

I fill us each a mug while he asks me in Russian how the night went. I tell him about her nightmare while I look through the fridge. Holding up a carton of eggs, I ask, “Do you like eggs and bacon?”

“I do, but you don’t have to go through all that trouble. I can just eat some toast or cereal.”

“It’s no trouble.”

Lev looks at the pants she’s wearing and tries not to laugh. “She looks like she’s expecting a flood, man, get her some damn clothes.”

I laugh and start filling a pan with bacon. “She ordered some stuff while I took a shower.”

“Holy shit, you let her touch your computer?”

“I’m not that bad,” I say, but he’s right. I really am that bad about my equipment.

“I’ve known you my whole damn life, and I’m barely allowed to look at your damn laptop, let alone put my hands on it.”

Simona watches us, not having the slightest clue what we’re saying. I shake my head at Lev, but he just keeps watching us.

“Two down, three to go, I guess,” he says with a smirk.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

He gives a big smile, showing off that lip ring he’s had since we were fifteen. “Whatever you say, brother.”

He gives Simona a wink just to irritate me and then goes off to shower.

“What was that all about?” she asks, cracking some eggs into a bowl before whisking them.

“Nothing important,” I tell her.

I take care of the bacon while she does the eggs, and it’s like we’ve been doing this for years. It’s easy being around her, and when we sit down at the counter, I refill her coffee and hand her the creamer and sugar like I’d seen her use while I was talking to Lev. She looks up surprised.

“You really pay attention to details.”

“I do. My brain rarely shuts off. There’s always something going on up there, so I tend to pay attention to little things around me as a way to sort of

ground me."

"What do you have going on up there?"

I smile. "Nothing worth talking about." I could tell her that I've imagined fucking her in exactly five different positions since we walked into this kitchen, and that I've noticed every single thing she's done, from the delicate way she whisks the eggs to the fact that she seems to like to alternate between bites of egg and bacon, but I don't. I'm not so sure she'd appreciate that sort of attention to detail.

She studies me while she takes another bite of her eggs and then takes a bite of bacon. I hide my smile and eat my food.

"Where's everyone else at?" she asks.

"Matvey and Vitaly are either sleeping or working out or off doing who the hell knows what. Emily has horrible morning sickness at the moment, so Roman is probably back there doing everything he can to make her feel better."

"You all seem pretty excited about the baby."

The smile comes easily when I say, "We are. The poor little thing is going to have the most overbearing uncles on the planet."

Simona laughs. "He or she is very lucky to have you all."

I think about the little baby who will be here before we all know it, and for the first time, I feel a stab of jealousy. I'm thrilled for Roman, but this is the first time I've envied him. Pushing the thought aside because I have no idea what to do with it, I ask, "So what did you order?"

"I got some pants and shirts."

Something about the way she says it has me raising a brow. "What exactly did you get?"

She stalls by taking her last bite and then finishes her coffee. Grabbing my plate, she gets up and walks across the island to the sink.

"I told you what I got."

I walk over to help her load the dishwasher. "How much did you spend?"

"Not much," she quickly says. "And I can pay you back."

"Fuck, that's not what I mean. I'm guessing you didn't spend near enough." I grab my phone and pull up my bank's app. When I see the newest transaction of $85, I let out a laugh and shut the dishwasher. Grabbing her arm, I lead her back to the stairs.

"What are you doing?"

“I’m going to help you get what you need.”

“I got what I needed,” she protests.

“Not even close, *sladkaya*.”

I bring her back into my room and sit her ass back down in my lap. With my arms around her, I pull up the site and look at my past orders. I let out a harsh laugh when I see what she got.

“Are you kidding me, Simona? One pair of jeans, two shirts, and some panties and a bra?”

“It’s enough for now,” she says. “It didn’t feel right to spend more of your money. You’ve already spent so much on me.” She turns to look at me. “Remember? You’re out 3.5 million because of me.”

“Like I give a fuck about money.” I give her a wink. “I’m a hacker, baby. I’ll just steal more.”

She smiles at the endearment before turning back to the screen.

“You’re not allowed out of my lap until you spend at least five thousand dollars.”

“What? I’ve never spent that much at one time in my life, Danil.”

“Well, get used to it. Start shopping.” I kiss her shoulder. “Or not. I like you in my lap, so I have no problem if you want to take your time and stay here all day.”

“You say that now. Just wait till I put your leg to sleep.”

I laugh and move my leg, giving her a soft bounce. “Never going to happen,” I tell her.

She smiles but doesn’t say anything. I watch as she slowly starts to pick things out. When she starts to aimlessly search from one thing to the next, I say, “Don’t forget shoes.”

When she immediate searches for Converse All Stars, I smile even bigger. I like learning about her, her likes and dislikes. She spends an insane amount of time flipping through the colors before I laugh and say, “Why not get all the colors you want?”

She chews her bottom lip and picks out three different colors, but I get the distinct impression that she wants more, so when she tries to leave the page, I reach around and use the trackpad to throw five other colors into the cart.

“You’re crazy,” she says.

I kiss her cheek. “You wanted them, so I’m going to make damn sure you get them. Don’t forget everything else, too, like bathroom stuff, lotions,

perfumes, all that good stuff, a watch if you want one, anything you want." I look at the subtotal. "You've got a long way to go."

She sighs and gets to work. When she's finally hit five thousand, I complete the purchase and then pull up the Apple store. I grab her a MacBook and a new phone.

"Which color do you like?"

"This is for me?"

I smile at her. "Of course it's for you. Which color?"

"The gold is pretty," she finally says when it's obvious I'm not going to budge on this.

After I've placed that order, I do a quick search for what I need and when the store pops up, Simona turns to me with a *what the fuck* look on her beautiful face.

"You're going to need something to wear to that party. The sluttier, the better."

"For who? It's sure as hell not going to be better for me."

"Not for me either, well, at least not after you've left this room. You think I want everyone looking at you in something like this?" I ask, pointing at the woman with the dress that's so tiny it's barely covering her ass.

She taps her fingers on my desk. "Why do you care?"

"I just do."

"I'm going to need a better answer than that at some point."

I smile and scroll through the dresses, stopping on one that I know will look amazing on her. The blue is the same color as her eyes, and just the thought of her in it has me growing hard again.

"Need me to leave you alone with these gorgeous models?"

"It's not the models that did this," I tell her.

She laughs. "Yeah, okay."

"That dress is the same color as your eyes, and you're going to look fucking amazing in it."

She's quiet while she looks at the photo and then back at me. "You confuse the hell out of me."

"How so?"

She gives a small shrug. "I just haven't quite figured you out yet."

Without another word, she puts the dress in the cart.

"You'll need more than one. See anything else you like?"

“I didn’t like the last one,” she grumbles, and I smile. When she turns her head and sees it, she says, “Yeah, laugh it up. You wouldn’t be smiling if you were the one who had to walk around half-naked in front of a bunch of perverted strangers.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right, and believe me when I say I’m not looking forward to them looking at you. I will enjoy seeing you in these dresses before we leave, though.”

“Well, I won’t look like them,” she mutters, looking back at the models on the screen.

“No, you’ll look a thousand times better.”

She doesn’t say anything, but I see the blush spread across her cheeks and the way she bites her bottom lip to keep from smiling. Together, we pick out four more dresses, each one tinier than the next, and by the time I hand her my credit card, I’m so hard I can barely think. I’m debating whether to take another shower when she stands and walks over to the windows. I’d lifted the blackout curtains earlier, and the sun is streaming in.

“This place is really beautiful.” She steps closer, noticing the door that the curtains had been hiding. “Wow, you have your own balcony?”

I smile at her enthusiasm and walk over to her. “I do. The terrace outside the living room is a lot bigger. There’s a pool and hot tub on that one.”

She raises a brow at me with her hand on the doorknob, silently asking if it’s okay to go out. I nod and she opens the door with a gasp. The balcony is large enough for a couple of lounge chairs and a small table. I don’t often come out here, but I should. The view over the city is pretty fucking amazing.

“This is beautiful.” She grabs the railing and looks down, and the sight of her so close to the edge makes my fucking palms sweat and my heart speed up.

“Goddamn,” I blurt out, stepping closer and wrapping an arm around her upper chest to pull her back.

She laughs and looks up at me. “Scared of heights?”

“No, I just don’t like seeing you so close to the edge.”

Her smile widens, and I know I’m not going to like what she does next. I can see the mischief in her blue eyes, the desire to see how far she can push things. It’s the same glint I’ve caught a glimpse of before, except this time there isn’t any terror mixed with it. It’s a look that’s damn near

hypnotizing—a look I'll never be able to resist. How the hell did she get me wrapped around her finger so damn quickly?

"So this would bother you?" she asks, giving a playful laugh as she hikes a foot up onto the lower railing.

Even with my arm still wrapped around her it makes me too nervous to let her continue, so I don't. I pick her up and carry her back inside, locking the damn door behind me.

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Chapter 6

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Simona

I’ve decided I like to see Danil worried about me. When those grey eyes turn serious and his whole body radiates with this need to protect me and I know he’s seconds away from putting his hands on me, it’s like a damn drug, and I want more. My parents were very loving, but I’ve never had a man act protective towards me, especially not a man like Danil. I knew putting my foot on the railing would get a reaction. I just didn’t think he’d actually pick me up and carry me inside. It did not escape my notice that he locked the door so I can’t make a mad dash back out there and touch my toes to the railing.

“Afraid I’m going to lose my balance and fall to a grisly death?”

He raises a dark brow at me. “That’s not funny. Don’t even joke about that.”

“What exactly do you and your brothers do?” I ask him. “I mean, besides you stealing money for them and trying to bust sex trafficking rings.”

He keeps his eyes on mine when he says, “We’re a Bratva. We started in Moscow, and then after Alina was taken, we came here because everything we could find about her disappearance led us to this city. We have men under us who do whatever we tell them to do, and we’re slowly taking over a section of the city. When it’s time, we’ll take over completely, and as soon as we find Alina, we’re going to kill a lot of people.”

His eyes light up when he says that last bit, reminding me that I really don’t know a damn thing about the man who’s currently holding me.

“You’re looking forward to killing them, aren’t you?”

“Very much so, *sladkaya*. I’ve seen enough evidence of what they do, and I’m very much looking forward to spilling their blood. Sometimes that thought is the only thing that keeps me going.”

He pulls me closer and kisses my forehead, and the sweetness of that touch is in such sharp contrast to what he’s just told me.

“And now I have another reason to want to kill them,” he whispers against my skin. “I’m going to find the doctor who touched you, and I’m going to make him pay. He’ll beg for death long before I’m ready to give it to him.”

It’s hard for me to imagine the man who’s been so sweet to me killing someone, but it doesn’t sound like a bunch of bravado. He’s not bragging or trying to make himself sound tough. He’s just stating a fact, and that’s unsettling but also kind of comforting, and I have no idea what to do with that, so I ignore it.

“Those women at the club last night seemed to know you pretty well,” I say, changing the subject.

He sighs and sets me down on the edge of the bed. Grabbing my hand, he lifts it up so he can take a look at my tattoo, checking to see if the redness has gone down.

“I’ve never fucked any of them if that’s what you’re wondering.”

I wasn’t. I mean, maybe I was, kind of. “Do you like going to that club?”

“No, I do not.”

“But you get lap dances there and stuff?” I’m surprised by how much I hate the idea of some woman grinding away in his lap.

“There’s no and stuff,” he says, running his thumb along my skin beneath the tattoo. “I’ve had to get a few lap dances. There’s no way around it. If I’d said no, it would’ve been suspicious as hell, especially since we’re supposed to be into this sort of thing.”

I think about how to ask the next question without being too obvious. Keeping my eyes on his hand and the way his thumb is still stroking my inner wrist, I ask, “So is that something you’re going to continue to do?”

He doesn’t answer, and when I finally meet his eyes, there’s a soft smile playing at his lips. “No, *sladkaya*. I have an excuse to say no now. It’s not suspicious if I already have a woman in my lap. Everyone knows how much I paid for you. They’re going to expect me to have you with me. It’s your ass that’s going to be grinding in my lap.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling like a dumbass. “Yeah, about that.” I look everywhere but at him when I say, “I don’t really have much experience with anything like that, so maybe it’s best if we don’t do that.”

He hooks a finger under my chin, tilting my face back up to his. “You need to get comfortable with stuff like that if we’re going to make this believable.”

To my absolute horror, he steps back and grabs the leather office chair, rolling it over so it’s in the middle of the room. He sits down, his long legs bent at the knees as his thighs naturally spread, filling the chair with his powerful body. He pats his thigh and gives me a smile.

“Come on. We’re going to practice.”

“What?”

He curls his finger at me in the universal *get your ass over here* motion. “Would you rather have your first time be in front of everyone?”

“I’d rather not have to do it in front of anyone at all,” I counter.

“I know, but it might be something you need to do to fit in, and if that happens, you’ll feel better if you’ve done it before.”

He’s not wrong, but I still feel like a giant idiot walking over to him. I remember the gorgeous women at the club, and it makes me freeze in place.

“I’m not going to be like them,” I warn him. “There’s no way in hell I can compete with the other women who’ve been in your lap.”

“I don’t want you to be like them, and there is no comparison. You’ve already won, *sladkaya*.”

I shake my head. “I have no idea what to say when you say things like that.”

He gives a soft laugh. “You don’t need to say anything. Stop stalling and get in my lap, Simona.”

The longer I wait, the more awkward it’s going to be, so with a sigh, I climb onto his lap in what must be the most unsexy maneuvering he’s ever seen until I’m finally straddling him. I feel his body shaking with the laughter he’s trying to hide.

“Is now really the best time to laugh at me?”

“I’m sorry.” His eyes are lit up with amusement, and I can’t help but give a soft laugh, because sometimes you just have to. There’s no point in sitting here crying about my lack of innate sexiness. It’s just not one of the skills the universe saw fit to bless me with. I’ve got to work with what I’ve got, so I grip his shoulders for balance and meet his eyes.

“Okay, tell me what to do.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Get up and run out the door.”

He laughs again. “Because you don’t like being in my lap or because you’re embarrassed?”

“Mortified,” I correct. “Absolutely fucking mortified.”

“Okay, that I can work with.”

Using his feet, he wheels us back to his desk, and after a few clicks on his keyboard, music starts playing. A sultry beat fills his room, and the sound of it makes all this seem so much more real. Before, it almost felt like we were just joking around, but now, now it feels like I’m actually about to give this sexy man a lap dance. The man who I just learned is in a fucking Bratva and doesn’t mind killing people.

I should be appalled. I should be disgusted, and instead of talking about running out the door, I should actually be trying to escape. What the fuck is wrong with me that the very idea of leaving Danil bothers me? I don’t want to run from him. I want to harness my inner sex goddess and ride him to O-town. I want to erase every damn memory he has of another woman in his lap. It’s a dangerous thought, especially since I have no idea what he really thinks of me. He’s flirty, yes, but he probably is with everyone.

I don’t realize I’m playing a melody on his shoulders until he grips my hips and I return to the present moment to see my fingers rapidly tapping away against the hard muscle that’s seared into my memory.

“Just relax,” he murmurs, gripping my hips tighter, moving me just enough to encourage me to take over.

And I do.

I slowly rock my hips, and when he lets out a soft groan, it fills me with an unexpected sense of pride. Here is this insanely beautiful man, a man who could literally have anyone he wanted, and right now he’s beneath me, letting out masculine groans because of *me*. Fuck if that doesn’t make me feel like a damn goddess.

His jaw is tense when I lean closer and roll my hips again, allowing the music to guide my movements. I let out a soft gasp when I feel him grow hard beneath me. I’d seen him this morning, and it had taken all my willpower to not reach out and touch him, and then I’d heard him jerking off in the shower. I’d wanted so badly to open the door and join him, but my

nerves got the better of me. I wasn't even sure it was me he was thinking about, but I know it's me he's thinking about now.

His long fingers slide under my shirt, grazing the bare skin as he keeps a tight grip on my hips. I slide one hand to the back of his head, running my fingers through his thick hair as I grind even harder against him.

Our faces are almost touching when I ask, "Am I doing it right?"

He lets out another groan when I drag my pussy along his hard length.

"A fucking natural," he says, and his voice sounds strained, his accent much thicker.

I smile at his praise and then stop. "Well, okay. I guess we're good then."

The sad, distraught-sounding groan he gives makes me laugh.

"You're wicked, *sladkaya*, and I think you're trying to kill me."

"How am I doing that?" I ask. I don't have any fucking clue where this newfound courage is coming from, but I'm not about to question it now. I just go with it, rocking my hips again as I lean closer and whisper, "You don't feel dead to me."

I grind against the cock that feels impossibly big as he lets out another groan and closes the distance between us. He doesn't kiss me like I'm expecting, like I'm *wanting* him to. He drags his nose along my cheek, breathing me in as one of his hands releases the iron grip on my hip and starts to trail up my back. When he gets to the nape of my neck, he fists my hair and forces my head back so I'm held in place while his grey eyes burn into me. The dark, hungry look in his eyes should warn me to back off, but I don't stop working my hips. I'm long past the point where I can stop. My body is inching towards something, and it's not going to stop until it gets it. Lust flows through me, making me feel drunk on it, and when I let out a soft whimper, he pulls me closer, so close I can feel the heat of his breath on my lips.

"You're playing with fire, *sladkaya*," he warns. "And just so you know, I like to be in control. If anyone's going to be doing the teasing, it's going to be me."

I smile and roll my hips again, making sure to drag my pussy along the entire length of him.

"Fuck," he growls, fisting my hair even tighter. When he can speak again, he says, "Kiss me."

"What?"

“You heard me. I want your lips on me. Kiss me, *sladkaya*. Let me taste you.”

He doesn’t close the distance, doesn’t force the kiss on me. He waits for me to freely give it, but as soon as I press my lips to his, he cups the back of my head and takes control. He kisses me like his life depends on it, like he’ll never be able to get enough, and I open for him, letting him take whatever the hell he wants.

His tongue runs along mine, delving in deep as he forces my mouth open even wider, claiming every damn inch as his. I’ve been kissed before, or at least I thought I had, but this kiss makes me realize just how shitty my sexual experiences have been up until now, because nothing has ever felt as good as this moment. Danil’s strong arms are wrapped around me, his skilled tongue making my damn head spin, and the large cock that’s pressing firmly against my pussy has me about to explode.

When I whimper, he kisses me harder, digging his fingers into my hip again, moving me harder against him, wanting to push me over the edge.

“Give me what I want,” he growls against my lips before giving my bottom lip a soft bite.

“What do you want?”

“I want you to come undone in my lap.” His teeth graze my lip. “I want to feel you squirm against me as you come so hard you can barely breathe.” His tongue swipes my upper lip. “I want you to come apart for me. I want you to break for me.”

I cup his face and slide my tongue between his lips as I work my hips harder. The tension builds between my legs. My pussy aches for release, and I’m desperate to get it. My need overrides everything else as I completely let go and surrender to the feeling. I give a part of myself to Danil that I’ve never given anyone.

His mouth is fierce, insistent, pulling the orgasm from my body along with a scream that’s muffled by his lips. He lets out a deep growl that sends a flutter of excitement through every cell in my body, and when I moan his name, he tightens his grip on me, molding our bodies together so I can’t tell where he ends and I begin. I’m not so sure there’s even a distinction anymore. I’ve made myself come before, but never with anyone else, and there’s something about feeling his thick cock pressed against my pussy that turns me downright feral.

One of his hands threads into my hair, fisting it tight enough to sting as his other hand slides around to grip my ass. He palms one of my cheeks, squeezing hard while he keeps me grinding against him, forcing another orgasm onto me. He doesn't let up until I'm gasping for air against his lips and my entire body is shaking. I melt against him, every part of me humming from pleasure overload, and I know I'm never going to be the same. You can't go back after experiencing something like this. I will never be the same person I was thirty minutes ago. Not after this, and not after sharing it with him.

Instead of putting distance between us, Danil softens his grip on me while he kisses me gently. I'm completely cocooned in his arms, surrounded by the scent of him and the taste and feel of him. It's downright intoxicating, and I feel more than a little drunk on him by the time he finally pulls away.

"That was one hell of a lap dance, *sladkaya*, but I've changed my mind. You're not allowed to do this in front of anyone else."

When I smile, he gives my bottom lip a soft bite.

"I'm not allowed to, huh?"

"No," he says. "No one gets to see this but me, and I swear to god if you have an orgasm in front of anyone else, I'm going to cut their fucking eyes out."

"Damn," I whisper, but the dark, possessive tone of his voice has my hips rocking against him again.

The corner of his mouth lifts up as he gives a soft laugh. "I'm glad you like my possessive side, because it's here to stay."

"Are you always this possessive?"

He cups my face, dragging his thumb along my bottom lip. "No, *sladkaya*. I've never cared enough about anyone to be possessive before." He gives me another sexy grin. "That lap dance felt fucking amazing."

Now that my lust isn't clouding my thinking, the embarrassment starts to creep in. He sees it and brings his other hand up so he's cupping my face. When I bring my eyes to his, I can tell he's studying my reaction, memorizing every detail.

"Are you sure you've never given one before?"

I let out a soft laugh. "Yeah, I've definitely never done that before. I don't really like having all the attention on me. I still can't believe I did it."

He’s still hard beneath me, and I can’t imagine he’s all that comfortable, but he makes no move to scoot me off his lap. He seems perfectly content to just keep me right where I’m at, and I’m perfectly fine with that.

His thumb drags along my bottom lip again, pulling another soft gasp from me. His fingers trail lower, stopping when he’s at my pulse.

“Your heart is racing,” he murmurs, leaning closer so our lips are almost touching.

“That’s your fault.”

“My fault?” He runs his tongue along my bottom lip, smiling when he feels my heart speed up even faster beneath his fingers.

“I can’t go fast,” I blurt out. “I know it sounds stupid to say that after what just happened, but I need to take it slow. I mean, if you want to do more or whatever,” I add because I haven’t humiliated myself enough today.

“Oh, I definitely want more, *sladkaya*, and I’ll go as slow as you need me to.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you willing to wait?” It dawns on me that he might not have any intention of not sleeping around while he’s waiting on me. When I instinctively pull back at the thought of him fucking another woman, he keeps his fingers pressed to my pulse while his other arm snakes around my lower back, keeping me in his lap.

“Not so fast. Tell me what you just thought about.”

“It occurred to me that you might find someone else to fuck while you wait for me.”

His eye soften at my words before he kisses me. It’s a slow kiss, a savoring kiss, and with his hand wrapped around my neck, it’s an all-consuming kiss. He feels my heartbeat race as I open my mouth to him and let out another whimper of pure need. God, this man’s kisses are dangerous. I can’t think straight when his mouth is on me, and I can’t for the life of me remember why I said I wanted to take it slow.

“I would never do something like that to you,” he murmurs against my lips.

“We just met yesterday,” I remind him, “when you bought me at an auction.”

He laughs, and I can’t help but join him because it’s truly insane.

“I know. It’s crazy, and I can’t explain it, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to throw it away.”

“Throw what away?” I ask.

“This,” he says, giving a small shrug. “Whatever the hell this is between us, I want to see where it leads. I told you that I knew you were the one the second I saw your photo. I wasn’t lying. I wouldn’t have been able to leave that building without you. I would’ve done anything to get you out of there, even if that meant killing whoever managed to outbid me and stealing you from him.”

I reach up and grab onto his wrists. His hand is still around my throat, but it’s not tight, and I find it oddly reassuring.

“Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask me anything you want. Always.”

My fingers tap out a quick rhythm on his skin, making him smile. “What were you thinking about in the shower earlier?”

He laughs, giving me that big, sexy grin of his. “You mean when you heard me jerking off?”

I laugh. “Yeah. Sorry, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“I was thinking about you. What the hell did you think I was thinking about?”

“I don’t know. Anyone. I’m sure you’re surrounded by beautiful women.” I don’t even want to think about how many gorgeous women he’s probably fucked, so I push the thought from my mind, refusing to give into the insecurities that have always plagued me.

“I was only thinking about you.”

“About what, though?”

“Probably not what you’re imagining. I thought of how good it had felt to wake up with your ass wiggling against my cock, about how damn good you always smell, and about your eyes. I’ll never be able to get enough of those blue eyes, *sladkaya*. They’re going to be the end of me.”

He gives me another wink. “The next time I do it, I’m going to be thinking about the lap dance you just gave me and about how goddamn sexy you looked when you came for me.”

“The next time?”

“Yes, the next time.” He gives a soft laugh. “You drive me fucking crazy. I can’t stay soft around you. It’s enough to drive a man insane.”

“I’m sorry,” I start to say, but he cuts me off.

“Don’t you dare apologize or feel like we need to do more. I’m fine, and I love the way you make me feel, even if it is frustrating at times. It’s a good kind of frustration. I can put up with a hard dick, baby.”

Resting my forehead against his, I relax into his touch, and I’m just about to suggest something completely insane, like maybe I could help him out with this erection problem of his, when there’s a knock at his door. Danil says something in Russian right before the door opens and Vitaly walks in.

“Well, what have we here?”

I let out an embarrassed groan and wrap my arms around Danil’s neck so I can duck my head and avoid looking at his brother.

“Are you seriously practicing lap dances without me?”

I hear him walk closer before I feel a soft pat on my shoulder as he walks by to turn the music off. The silence is even worse. I feel like they can both hear how fast my heart is beating. I know Danil can feel it because he’s moved his hand to the back of my neck, but his fingers are still on my pulse. The man apparently has a thing for heartbeats.

“I don’t know if you know this, Simona,” Vitaly says, “but I’m kind of an expert on lap dancing. I run a strip club, you’re invited to opening night by the way, and I’ve been around a lot of strippers. I could rate you if you need me to, maybe give you some pointers, that sort of thing.”

“She doesn’t need any pointers,” Danil says, and then adds something in Russian that makes Vitaly laugh even harder.

“I just thought I’d offer my services,” he says, walking back around so he’s standing behind me. “I like to be helpful like that.”

“Thanks, Vitaly,” I mumble against Danil’s neck. Both men laugh while I turn a very unattractive shade of red. “This is so not funny,” I whisper just loud enough for Danil to hear.

He kisses the side of my head and hugs me tighter against him while he and Vitaly have a conversation in Russian. Before Vitaly leaves, he pats my shoulder again and says, “Let me know if you ever want to upgrade your skills and do some pole work. I’d hire you on the spot.”

“You can fucking leave now,” Danil growls at him.

I hear Vitaly’s laughter slowly recede as he walks down the hall and back up the stairs.

“Sorry about that,” Danil says. “When we were seventeen, Matvey and I lost a bet to him, and we had to call him the sex god of our group. He was a

cocky bastard before that, but ever since then, he's been unbearable."

I laugh into his neck, hearing the affection in Danil's voice when he talks about his brothers.

"I like your family. I was an only child, so this is kind of nice."

"Before we decided to become a family, I was an only child, too."

"What were your parents like?"

"They're not worth talking about," he says, kissing my temple. Before I can ask anything else, he says, "I hate to say it, but I do need to go out for a bit. Vitaly didn't only come down here to be annoying. He came to remind me of something we need to do."

"Sounds mysterious."

"Just work stuff."

I lift my head. "You mean mafia stuff."

He kisses the tip of my nose. "Bratva stuff, *sladkaya*. We're Russian, not Italian."

"You still haven't told me what that word means."

"I know."

When he doesn't elaborate, I lift a brow and say, "And?"

"And I'll be back as soon as I can. Will you be okay here? Emily's upstairs with Roman. Matvey's around here somewhere, and Lev's coming with us."

He scoots us back over to his desk. Digging around in a drawer, he pulls out a phone. "Here, you can use my old one until your new one comes in." He turns it on and sends a quick text to his new number so I'll have it. "Text me if you need anything at all." He gives me another smile. "Or if you just miss me and want to say hi."

"I don't want to bother you while you're doing scary Bratva stuff."

"You couldn't bother me if you tried."

"I might put that to the test one day."

He gives another laugh. "Please do. I'd love to see you try."

I run my fingers over his thick stubble. He didn't shave this morning, and it's already noticeably thicker. He watches me as I trace the lines of his face, familiarizing myself with the chiseled jaw, the almond-shaped grey eyes, the dark lashes and eyebrows, the slope of his nose, and the full, kissable lips that I will never get enough of. I could spend the rest of my life kissing this man, and it would never be enough. My fingers run down the tanned skin of his neck.

“Be careful,” I whisper.

He smiles at my words. “Always.”

Cupping the back of my head, he pulls me closer and kisses me. It’s a gentler kiss than the half-crazed, feral way we were kissing earlier, but it’s just as heated, and it causes the same reaction in my body. He pulls away before I’m ready to let him go.

“This is happening fast,” I whisper against his lips, because it is, way too fast than is probably smart, but how do you stop feeling things? How do I turn my body off when he so easily turns it on? I can’t fight the attraction I feel for him. It’s impossible. The only thing I can do is hope I survive it, because I’m falling hard for a very powerful, very dangerous man, and there isn’t a goddamn thing I can do to stop it.

“We have all the time in the world,” he reminds me. “I’m not going anywhere, Simona. There’s no rush, but I want you to know that I’m feeling everything you are.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

He smiles. “Well, believe it. In fact, I’d say I’m probably feeling more, but I don’t want to scare you, so I’ll leave it at that.” He gives my ass a soft smack. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

I give him one more quick kiss before standing up. I immediately miss the feel of him, the warmth of his body, the way he makes me feel safe, I miss it all. He stands, giving me a wink when he reaches down to adjust his cock. I feel bad that he has to walk around uncomfortable, but there’s no denying the thrill I get at seeing his reaction to me. I love knowing that I’ve made this incredibly gorgeous man hard. I still find it hard to believe, but the proof is impossible to miss. The man is huge, and when I hear his soft laugh, I realize I’m still staring at the massive bulge in his pants.

He closes the distance and cups the back of my head, pulling me in for one last kiss. “Make yourself at home, *sladkaya*. I’ll be back soon.”

“Okay.” I wrap my arms around him, giving him a hug. A flicker of fear runs through me when I start thinking about the dangerous kind of life he leads. He kisses my forehead and then to prove my point, he grabs a gun from one of his desk drawers and tucks it in the waistband of his jeans against the small of his back so his T-shirt hides it from view and then puts his laptop in his messenger bag and slings it across his chest.

With one last sexy wink, he says, “Stay off the balcony, baby,” and then disappears out the door.

I look around his large room, having no idea what to do with myself. Too antsy to stay in one place, I venture out into the hall, and when I see it's empty, I start walking. I'm not about to start barging into closed doors, but I do investigate the ones that are open. The room closest to Danil's bedroom has another amazing view of the city. The room is empty except for a desk and a couple of leather chairs. There's a bathroom attached to this room as well, but it doesn't look like anyone does much of anything in here. This place is so big that they probably have several rooms that really don't serve a purpose. My entire apartment could fit in these two rooms alone, and instead of floor-to-ceiling windows with an amazing view, I have a shitty window above my sink that's nailed shut and looks out onto a brick wall. It's super awesome. The window in my living room looks out directly into the window of my neighbor—an older man who loves to walk around in his tighty-whities and scratch his balls while he binges Netflix. I never open the blinds because for some ungodly reason he always keeps his wide open. I'd rather stare at the brick wall.

Continuing down the hall, I pass a couple of closed doors before finding a room with a pool table. Stepping in, I let my fingers graze the edges of the table while I take in the large TV on the other wall and the assortment of gaming consoles. There's also a bar, and I seriously think about making myself a drink to take the edge off. I decide to forgo the alcohol for now and walk over to the couch. I'm not much of a gamer, but I could use the distraction, so I get myself set up with the first game I find. It's a racing game, and I have zero hopes that I'll be good at it, but I don't care. I just need something to do with my hands. I'd kill for a piano or, hell, even one of those tiny keyboards for kids. Anything that I can play that has keys on it.

I've just crashed my car for the third time when I hear someone say, "Mind if I join you?"

I turn to see Matvey staring at me from the doorway. He's in a black hoodie and jeans, but he doesn't have the hood pulled up today. His dark eyes watch me, waiting for me to say it's okay before he walks in to join me.

"Sure," I tell him, "but I'm really bad."

"I can see that."

I laugh, but all he gives me is a small smile. I wonder if he ever gives full ones. I'm guessing not. He grabs another controller and gets himself set

up. I see the scars on his large hands and the tattoos that cover them. They creep up his wrists, disappearing beneath the hoodie. My heart breaks for him, but I don't say anything. I'm not sure it would be welcomed right now, and I don't want to bring up painful shit. I don't want to make him feel any worse than he already does, so we sit in silence and we play the game.

He wins every time, over and over again, and it's the exact kind of mindless entertainment that I need. When I crash yet again, I laugh and relax deeper into the cushion. I'm so caught up in the game that it takes me a second to realize the phone Danil gave me is buzzing in my pocket. When the race is over, I pull it out right as I hear Matvey's phone give a soft ding. We both check them at the same time. I smile when I see the texts.

You doing okay?

Sorry, this is taking longer than I wanted. We should be done in another hour or two.

Text me when you see this so I know you're doing okay.

Baby, you're killing me. I'm gonna text Matvey to come check on you.

Matvey types something on his phone and says, "He's worrying about you."

I hurry up and text *I'm sorry. I didn't notice the phone going off. Matvey and I are playing a racing game, and he's kicking my ass. I'm terrible at this.*

When Matvey sets his phone beside him on the couch, I look over and see the photo on his screen. I'm too stunned to look away and play it cool, so he notices, and all I can do is offer a quick apology for so obviously snooping.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare."

"It's okay." He picks his phone back up and holds it out to me. "You should know what she looks like in case you see her somewhere."

I take his phone, knowing he's just handed over something incredibly personal and special to him. It's hard to believe that the smiling man in the photo is the same one that's sitting right next to me. In the picture, he's smiling, like *eyes lit up and teeth showing* smiling. He has his arms wrapped around a beautiful woman, and her face is pressed close to his. She's smiling just as big as he is, and my throat starts to tighten when I see how obviously head-over-heels in love they are. Her green eyes stare at me from the photo, and my heart breaks for them. It fucking shatters when I

think about what she's going through right now. When I feel the tears prick the corners of my eyes, I take a breath and force them to stop.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, trying to hide how close I am to crying. That's the last thing he needs. "She's very beautiful. She has such pretty eyes."

He gives a soft smile. "They were blue like yours when she was younger, and then they turned into more of a bluish green. They change sometimes, depending on what color shirt she's wearing."

I take one last look at their smiling faces. "You two look so happy together."

"We were," he says, taking his phone back. He looks at the photo, running a scarred thumb over the outline of her cheek before pocketing it again. "You don't recognize her?"

"I don't. I'm so sorry. I only saw the women who were auctioned with me, and then two other women who were responsible for getting me ready. I wasn't allowed to talk to them, but they weren't Alina."

He doesn't say anything, just gives a soft nod and grabs the controller again. I can feel the worry and anger radiating off him, but there's nothing he can do, not now at least, so we both lose ourselves in the game, anything to distract us from reality. We don't stop playing until Roman comes down looking for us.

"Hey, you guys want tacos? Emily has a craving, so I'm about to place an order." He watches me skid off the road and laughs. "You're terrible at this."

"I know. You'd think I'd be a little better at it by now, but this is like the hundredth time I've crashed."

"She's not lying," Matvey says, making me laugh.

"All right, I need in on this," Roman says. Before he grabs a remote, he places the order for food and then sits in one of the chairs. We're well into the next race when Emily walks in.

"Oh my god, seriously?" She laughs and walks over.

"Sorry, *solnishka.*" Roman reaches out and pulls her onto his lap. With his arms around her, he finishes the race, still managing to beat me by a good minute.

Emily grabs another remote and joins in. Everyone's better than me, but I don't care. I'm having fun, and being with Danil's family feels good. I like them, and I like how natural it feels to be with them. I watch as Roman

slows his car down, letting his wife pass him by, and when she does, she laughs and kisses his cheek.

"Thanks, babe."

He looks at her like she's his whole world, smiling when she crosses the finish line right behind Matvey. We keep playing until Roman gets a text that the food is here. While he runs down to get it, I check my phone, missing Danil and wishing he was here. There's another text waiting for me.

Whatever you do, don't play pool with Matvey. The man never loses. He kicks my ass on a regular basis. I'm glad you're having fun. Make sure you get something to eat. Hopefully, I'll be back soon.

I hurry up and text him back. *We're all playing the racing game. I'm the loser, like every damn time. Roman ordered tacos. Coming back soon?*

His response is immediate. *Not as soon as I'd like. If I were there, I'd help you kick ass in the game. We could take them for sure. I'm missing you, sladkaya, and I can't stop thinking about that dance you gave me.*

My face heats up at the memory. *I miss you too.*

Roman comes back with the food, so I set the phone aside. For the next couple of hours we eat and laugh and play the game. By the time we stop, I can barely keep my eyes open and Emily's already fallen asleep in Roman's lap. He picks her up, kissing her forehead and whispering something in her ear before he starts to carry her to their room.

I tell them all goodnight and make my way back to Danil's room. After I wash my face and brush my teeth, I step into his closet, looking for a shirt I can wear. When I spot the clothes hamper, I know I'm on dangerous ground. Grabbing one of the T-shirts, I bring it to my face and inhale. As soon as his scent hits me, I let out a sigh and feel my heart speed up. A warmth spreads all through me, and I know the decision's been made. Without a second thought, I strip and put his used shirt on. My plan is to just play dumb. Chances are high that he won't even notice. It's a plain black tee, just like the one I slept in last night. There's no way in hell he'll be able to tell that it's not the same one.

Feeling bold, I peel off my panties and toss them in the hamper. I'm guessing he'll never know about that either. I want to feel his shirt against me, and I don't want to wear anything else. My little secret.

Crawling into bed, I grab the phone and send him another text. *I can't stay up any longer, but wake me when you get back. Please be careful.*

Night, baby. I’ll be home soon.

I smile and snuggle in deeper, surrounding myself with his scent. I have no idea how to work his fancy blackout curtains, so the moonlight streams in along with the soft glow from the bustling city beneath us. No matter how hard I try to stay awake and wait up for him, I can’t do. I fall asleep with the phone clutched in my hand and my arms wrapped around his pillow.

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Chapter 7

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Danil

When I walk in my room, the first thing I see is Simona's splayed-out body. She's thrown off all the covers and is lying on her back, arms and legs stretched out, and the T-shirt she's wearing has ridden up to the tops of her thighs. Her dark hair is a mess around her, her lips slightly parted as she lets out a soft snore, and the sight makes my heart feel tight in my chest. She's so goddamn beautiful.

I've been gone way longer than I'd planned, but Roman and Matvey both texted me updates earlier, letting me know how she was doing and what was going on. Despite her abysmal gaming skills, I can tell they both like her, and that means a lot to me.

Being careful to not wake her, I set my bag down and go into the bathroom to get ready for bed. Once I'm done, I strip down to my boxer briefs and climb in beside her. She doesn't wake when I gently roll her onto her side and wrap an arm around her, pulling her body in close against mine. I bury my face in her neck, breathing in the scent that I've been craving all day, but at first all I can smell is my cologne.

What the fuck?

I lift my head, and there's enough moonlight streaming in for me to see the black T-shirt she's wearing. It's not the same one she wore last night, though. I let out a soft laugh when I realize she's taken one of the dirty ones from the hamper. God, she's just as crazy as I am. Brushing her hair aside, I pull the collar of the shirt aside, so I can press my nose against her bare skin, smiling when I'm able to get her scent instead of mine. Much better. I kiss her soft skin and breathe her in, feeling my whole body relax for the first time since I left her.

Before I fall asleep, I shut the curtains so the rising sun won't wake us at some ungodly hour. I can no longer see her in the pitch-black room, but I can feel her. I rest my hand against her heart, and count the steady beats as I drift off to sleep. At some point in the night, her scared whimpers wake me up, but when I kiss her neck and murmur against her skin that she's safe, that I've got her and I'll never let anyone hurt her again, she calms down and doesn't even wake up. I wait until her breathing evens out and her heart rate slows down before I allow myself to fall asleep again.

When I open my eyes several hours later, the first thing I see is a pair of blue eyes watching me. I laugh and scrub a hand over my face as I stretch my arms up in a yawn. She's opened the curtains, so the sunlight is streaming in, lighting up the entire room.

"Watching me sleep, *sladkaya?*" I ask her with a grin. "Wearing my dirty shirts and spying on me while I sleep, better be careful, baby, you're getting dangerously close to stalker territory."

She gives me a big smile and laughs. "How'd you know it was dirty? It's the same exact kind of shirt I wore the first time."

"Because when I buried my face in your neck last night, all I could smell was myself."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"Because you needed your sleep." I reach out and run my finger along the soft skin of her cheek. "I'm sorry I was gone so long yesterday. Vitaly ended up needing help with several things at the club. He wants everything perfect for opening night, and we can't do any of it tonight because of that damn party we have to go to."

"Is that all you were doing?"

"We also needed to talk to some of our men, and I wanted to drive by the address we're going to tonight and do a little research on the guy."

"Find anything interesting?"

"He's having the party while his wife is out of town visiting their four grandkids."

"Oh my god, are you serious?"

"Yes, unfortunately." I run my eyes over her, not wanting to think about the perverted jackass. Her blue eyes heat up, and when she runs her fingers up one of my arms, my body instantly responds to her touch.

"I really like your tattoos, Danil," she whispers, and I can't help but laugh at the awe in her voice. It's adorable and just makes me all the more

hungry for her.

“I’m glad you do.”

Using every ounce of willpower I possess, I keep my body still as her fingers run over me, exploring my arms and chest with featherlight touches that threaten to turn me downright feral at any second. When her fingers dip lower, nails trailing over my abs, I grip her wrist and force her to be still. My cock is rock-fucking-hard, straining against my boxers and tenting the sheet that covers me.

“Easy, *sladkaya*. I’m only human, baby.”

“But I want to make you feel better,” she whispers, leaning closer so her body is partially draped over mine. She pulls her hand free and drags her nails lightly down my chest before running them over my abs again. When she dips a finger into my boxers, I groan and grab her hand again.

“I’m fine, Simona. You don’t have to do this.”

She leans closer and kisses my chest. “Maybe I want to do this.”

Before she can do anything else, I’ve flipped her over, pinning her body to the bed with mine. Bringing my leg up, I part her thighs, nudging them open with my knee until she’s spread wide and my thigh is pressing against her pussy. Her shirt has ridden up, and when I feel her bare, wet pussy against my skin, I let out a deep groan.

“Fucking hell, you’re not wearing panties?”

“No,” she whispers, her eyes dangerously dark with her pupils blown and a *drunk on lust* look to them. Both of us are barely hanging on, and I’m wondering how much longer either one of us can last.

Not much longer for me, that’s for damn sure. As soon as she rocks her hips, gliding that smooth, wet pussy along my thigh, I nearly bust a goddamn nut. Gritting my teeth, I grab her hip, forcing her to be still while I catch my breath.

She runs her hands through my hair, kissing a line along my cheek as she whispers my name, the sound of it the perfect mix of sweet and sexy.

“Please, Danil,” she whispers, finding my lips and giving the bottom one a soft suck. I let go of her hip, knowing I’m helpless to resist her. This might very well be the end of me, but I can’t deny her the pleasure she’s so desperate for.

As soon as I move my hand, she starts rocking her hips in the same seductive rhythm she used for the lap dance, using my leg to try and get herself off. It’s the sexiest goddamn thing I’ve ever seen. I never thought I’d

be into dry humping, but, fucking hell, it's the sweetest kind of torture. Seeing her so needy, so desperate to come that she'll push aside her embarrassment and inhibitions and hump me like a fucking animal is downright intoxicating, and I'm drunk on it. I'm drunk on *her*.

She lets out a whimper and drags her nails along my back while I slide my hand up her shirt, running my fingers along her ribs. She moves her hands just long enough to pull her shirt off, and when she does, I know I'm in big fucking trouble. Her tits are just as perfect as I knew they would be. Her see-through dress had left little to the imagination, but it's not the same thing as seeing them completely bare and in front of me. She's the perfect size, filling the palm of my hand like her body was made just for me. Her moans fill the room when I lower my head and run my tongue over one hard nipple.

"Danil, please," she begs, bringing one hand down to reach for my cock.

I smile against her tit and give her nipple a soft bite as I move her hand away from me.

"But I need you," she whines.

"Slow, remember?"

"Fuck that," she growls, making me laugh.

"You're not thinking clearly, baby. You'll feel better after you come."

She's about to complain again when I wrap my mouth around her tit and suck her in, stealing the words from her as she throws her head back on a gasp and clutches at my shoulders. I tongue her nipple, worshipping her breast with my mouth as she writhes beneath me. I know she's close. She's already made a perfect mess on my thigh, and when I bring a hand between us and press my thumb against her clit, all it takes is three rubs before she's screaming my name and bucking against me.

Her pussy is soaking wet, and as she comes undone, I can't resist sliding a finger into her, growling her name when her pussy tightens around my finger, sucking me further in. I feel her inner walls tremble with her orgasm. I'd do anything to be inside her right now, to feel her come around my cock as she screams my name.

When she starts to come down, I give her nipple one last kiss before bringing my mouth to hers. I kiss her hard while I finger her slowly, letting her ride out the aftershocks until her body is shaking and she's panting beneath me.

“Holy shit,” she whispers, and the surprise in her voice makes me laugh, even though I’m so painfully hard I can barely breathe. “What the hell are you doing to me?”

“Me?” I ask, lifting up just enough to see her better. “You’re the one driving me crazy, *sladkaya*. You have no idea how goddamn perfect you are, how much I need and want you. You drive me crazy. Every fucking part of you drives me crazy.”

I slowly slide my finger out of her and bring it to my lips. When I get my first taste of her, every cell in my body lights up. She’s just as fucking sweet as I knew she would be. Just one taste, and I’m completely addicted. I could live off nothing but her for the rest of my life.

Her hand slides back down my chest and abs. She hesitates at my waistband. “Please, Danil. I want to make you feel better.”

“I’m fine, baby,” I say as my cock screams at me that I’m most definitely not okay.

“I don’t want you to jerk off in the shower without me.”

I don’t particularly want to do that either, but I don’t want her to feel pressured to do anything, so I just say, “Then I won’t jerk off. Just give me a few minutes, and I’ll be fine, baby. I promise.”

She scowls at me. “You’re a stubborn man, Danil.”

I’ve been called way worse, so I just grin down at her. The grin dies when she quickly snakes her hand into my boxers and wraps her hand around my shaft.

“Jesus Christ,” I growl as my hips instinctively rock forward, making my cock move against her hand. The sensation momentarily makes me forget my English as I tell her in Russian how much I fucking need her.

“Show me what to do,” she says, using her other hand to pull my boxers down so there’s nothing between us.

I reach down and wrap my hand around hers, tightening her grip as I show her how to work my cock. Her hand is so much smaller than mine, her fingers unable to fully wrap around me, but it doesn’t matter. I could come so easily just from this.

I’m covered in pre-cum, making it easy for our hands to glide along my cock. I look into her blue eyes, memorizing every detail of the woman I’ve quickly fallen for.

“I’m so fucking close, baby,” I say, warning her in case she wants to stop.

Instead of slowing down, she tightens her grip on me and cups the back of my head, pulling me closer as she bites my bottom lip, letting her teeth graze my skin and pushing me over the edge. I growl her name and kiss her hard as the orgasm thunders through me, consuming me as my cock pulses in our joined hands and I shoot my seed all over her stomach and breasts.

The pleasure surprises me. I've come countless times, fucked more women than I can even remember, but nothing has ever come close to this. I know I'm in serious trouble, that I've completely fallen for her, but there's no stopping it, no denying it, and definitely no changing it. I'm hers, completely and absolutely, and there's no fucking going back.

She lets out the sexiest whimper when my spent cock pulses one last time before I'm completely empty. Her hand softens, lazily stroking me as my body comes down. I keep kissing her, unable to get enough, and when I do finally pull back and look at the mess I've made on her, some caveman part of my brain lights up with pride at the sight of her covered in my cum.

"Fucking hell, baby," I groan, running my hand over her, covering her perfect tits with my seed until she's a glistening, sticky mess. Rolling us over, I gently lift her up so she's straddling me. She gives me an embarrassed smile, and in this moment with the sunlight streaming in and her naked body on full display, she's so goddamn beautiful that it freezes my brain. I can't think, can't form words in Russian or English. There's nothing there except this overwhelming feeling that I have for her. I'm not a man who's ever been in love. Fuck, I'm not a man who's ever even had the faintest desire to be in love, but here I am, smitten after two goddamn days.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, *sladkaya*."

My fingers run along her hips, trailing a line along her lower stomach and the bare skin of her smooth pussy. Every line of her body is permanently embedded in my brain. Even if she walked out of my life right now, I know without a shadow of a doubt that I would never get over her. I would never stop seeing her in my mind, never stop craving her touch, her scent, and the feel of her against me. I understand Matvey's pain in a whole new way now, and it fucking guts me. I don't know how he's survived so long. Every second of every day must be pure torture for him.

Simona sees something on my face and leans down to kiss me. She cups my face and whispers, "What's wrong?"

I smile against her lips. "You read me too easily. I've always kind of prided myself on being unreadable, an absolute enigma."

She laughs. “You are, but I’m learning to spot a few things. Please tell me what’s wrong.”

I reach up and tuck a strand of her dark hair behind her ear before trailing my fingers down her neck. “I was just wondering how Matvey survives each day without Alina. I didn’t understand it before, not fully anyway, not about how deep the pain would be.” I keep my eyes locked on hers when I say, “But I get it now.”

Her eyes soften at my words as her fingers run through the light beard I desperately need to shave. “Tell me what *sladkaya* means.”

I smile because it’s the last thing I expected her to say, and I’m also thrilled she hasn’t run away from the insane Russian who’s clearly obsessed with her.

“It’s similar to sweetie or sweetheart.”

“Is that something you usually call women?”

I laugh at how completely wrong she is. “No, baby. I’ve only ever called you that.”

She smiles and leans in to kiss me again. “Good.”

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her tighter against me before giving her ass a playful smack. “Come on, *sladkaya*. I need to hurry up and shower. Your stuff should be delivered soon.”

“You didn’t need to spend so much on overnight shipping.”

“I wanted to.”

I don’t tell her about the other big surprise I have coming for her, the one that had taken hours yesterday to get set up. I can’t wait to see her face. I had no idea it could be so much fun buying gifts for someone. Picking her up, I carry her into the bathroom and sit her on the counter. We’re both still naked, and I keep studying her curves as we brush our teeth. Her eyes run over me just as much as I’m eye-fucking her, and I have to force myself to behave. Grabbing the shaving cream and my razor, I laugh when she scoots her bare ass on the counter so she can see me better.

“Can I watch you shave?”

I laugh and start to lather up. “Can I watch you shave your legs?”

“That’ll be riveting entertainment,” she says with a laugh.

“Damn straight it will be.”

I’m still semi-hard, and when her eyes run over me again, I know I could easily go from semi to fully in just a few seconds. The effect she has on me is unreal. Turning the hot water on, I rinse the blade and start

shaving. Her blue eyes stay on me, watching every move I make. She acts like it's the best damn thing she's ever seen, and when I'm halfway done, I have to stop to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"You're just fucking adorable, *sladkaya*."

I swear her blue eyes fucking sparkle when she looks at me, and it makes my heart skip a beat every time I look into them. I manage to finish shaving without cutting myself, which is a miracle since I can't seem to focus on anything but her. When my face is rinsed off, she grabs my waist and pulls me closer. Cupping the back of my neck, she brings me down to her level and kisses my shaved cheek. With a sigh, she presses her face to mine and then kisses a line to my lips.

Threading my fingers through her hair, I kiss her slowly until I'm forced to stop or I'm going to end up fucking her right here on the damn counter. Her fingers caress my cheeks.

"I like this," she says, unable to stop touching my smooth face.

"Sorry, I sometimes get lazy about shaving."

"I like you with stubble, too," she quickly says, making me smile. "You're a very sexy man, Danil."

I laugh and lift her off the counter. Cupping her ass, I kiss the top of her head. "And you're the sexiest woman I've ever seen, Simona."

She laughs like she thinks I'm full of shit, but I'm being completely honest. I start the water, pulling her into the shower with me. It's pure torture to have her naked and wet and not pick her up and bury myself inside her, but despite the way she's looking at me, I know she'd feel more comfortable not rushing into sex. I'm also very aware that the last couple of days have been incredibly traumatic. I'm not about to push her into something that she might regret later. I can go as slow as she needs me to. I'd wait forever for her at this point. I can't imagine being with someone else now. The very idea pisses me off.

After we're all cleaned up, she puts on another one of my T-shirts, a clean one this time, and when we get upstairs, the intercom buzzes next to the elevator.

"Yeah?" I ask, letting go of the button so I can hear their response.

"Got a bunch of packages down here for Danil Melnikov. Need you to sign for 'em."

"Be right down," I tell him, pushing the button for the elevator.

She hops in with me as soon as the doors open. I run my eyes over her bare legs and the obvious fact that she's not wearing a bra. When she sees me staring, she crosses her arms over her chest and angles herself so my body is hiding hers.

"They won't see anything," she says, looking up at me with a cute smile.

"No, they fucking will not."

It's one thing for her to have to walk around in a tiny dress at the club, that's fucking bad enough, but for delivery men to see her like this? No fucking way. As soon as the doors open, I step in front of her, hiding her completely with my body. Her hand rests on my back as I lean against the door so the elevator will stay open and grab the form the man hands me. I quickly scrawl my name and hand it back to him.

"Need any help?" he asks.

"No, I've got it, thanks."

I hand him a large tip while Simona's hand slides down and grabs my ass. I bite back a laugh, and as soon as he's gone, I turn around and pick her up, catching her bottom lip between my teeth. I give her a soft bite while I give her ass a spank.

"Troublemaker," I whisper against her lips.

She gives a soft shrug. "You have a really nice ass."

I pull her shirt up, cupping her bare ass in my hands. "So do you, baby." I let out a groan when I dig my fingers into the soft flesh. "The things I want to fucking do to this ass, *sladkaya*."

Her eyes widen at my words. There's fear there, but there's also a good bit of lust. I give her a wink and set her back down so I can grab all the boxes. When the elevator is packed, we go back up and then bring it all down to my room. It's quickly feeling more like *our* room, especially when I go into the closet and move all my clothes to one side, giving her half the space.

She smiles when she sees what I've done and then starts unpacking. While she does that, I grab us some muffins and two mugs of coffee from upstairs. Matvey's devouring a big bowl of cereal when I walk in.

"All ready for tonight?" he asks in Russian.

"No, not really, but we're going all the same."

He watches me fix her mug of coffee just how she likes it before saying, "I know it's not going to be easy for you to have her around those men. It

killed Roman to do it, and I know it'll do the same to you."

"She'll be fine," I tell him. "I'll make sure of it, and Vitaly and Lev will be with me."

"It's not fair that I'm not doing anything."

I know it kills him to have to stay behind, but there's no way for him to fake it when he can't stand being touched. He won't be able to tolerate having a woman grind in his lap. I swear to god he'd break her neck before she was even ten seconds into it. No one but Alina touches Matvey. It's not something he can change.

"You're not doing shit right now because we're still at the gathering information stage," I remind him. "Soon, we're going to be at the killing stage, and then you'll be doing more than your fair share."

He nods but doesn't say anything.

"I know you'd be there tonight if you could. We all know that."

He drops his spoon into his empty bowl and runs a hand through his hair. "I can't stand them touching me," he admits. "The very idea of it makes my fucking skin crawl." He looks up at me, his dark eyes holding more pain than any one person should ever have to endure. "I should be able to fake it, though, right? For her? I should be able to do anything for her."

"No, you shouldn't and she would fucking hate that and you would never forgive yourself and you know it."

He can't hold my gaze. Looking away, he slams his closed fist onto the counter. I can feel the anger radiating off him. This is why he spends a large portion of his day in the gym we made upstairs. He has to have an outlet or he'll just fucking explode.

"If we needed you to be there tonight, it would be different, but not even Roman is going."

He gives a quick nod but doesn't say anything.

"We're getting close, Matvey. I fucking know it." Simona walks into the kitchen in a new pair of jeans and a pink T-shirt and grey All Stars, looking fucking delicious right as I tell Matvey in Russian, "I know there's a fucking Bratva behind this. If we can figure out who the Pakhan is, then we can track them down."

As soon as I stop speaking, Simona quirks a brow at me and asks, "Can you say that again but slower?"

I repeat the sentence slower and as soon as I say Pakhan, she snaps her fingers. “That word, what does that mean?”

“Pakhan? It’s the term used for the boss in a Bratva. Why?”

She gets an excited look on her face. “That’s what they called that guy I met. The two men who walked in and saw us right before we were taken to the auction. The guy who drugged me called him Pakhan.”

I shoot Matvey a quick look. “I fucking knew it.”

“Knew what?” Lev asks, walking in.

“Simona said she heard the man who drugged her calling someone Pakhan,” I tell him.

“Holy shit.” He walks over and grabs a mug of coffee. “Do you remember anything else?” he asks her. “A last name maybe?”

I can tell her mind is racing, trying like hell to remember details of a quick conversation in a language she doesn’t speak a single word of. It’s a damn miracle that she even caught this word, especially given she was scared to death with adrenaline coursing through her. When she shakes her head, she looks absolutely devastated.

“I’m really sorry. I don’t remember anything else. I’d recognize him, though. Him and the other guy he was with.”

I wrap an arm around her and pull her in close while I kiss the top of her head. “Don’t be sorry, *sladkaya*. You’ve been a huge help.”

Lev and Matvey raise a brow at my behavior, and Lev mixes his with a smirk, but I ignore it and keep Simona pressed in close against me.

“We’re going to find these bastards,” I tell them, more determined than ever to get to the fucking bottom of this.

We leave them in the kitchen, knowing they’ll let the others know. I want to get on my computer and dig around, and as soon as we get back in our room, I sit at my desk and quickly turn on all the monitors. Simona comes over and kisses my cheek.

“Let me know if you need help with anything,” she murmurs against my skin. Usually, nothing would be able to distract me from my work. I’d lock myself in my room and spend days working if that’s what it took, but with her, I can’t do that. I look away from the monitors and cup her face, kissing her like our lives depend on it. I fill myself with her, letting her consume me, wanting her to understand how badly I need and want her.

“Damn,” she whispers when I finally pull back and she can take a breath.

I smile and give her bottom lip a soft suck before she pulls back with a small groan. I watch her walk back over to the closet, unable to take my eyes off her just yet, but when she starts unpacking, I force my attention back to my computer.

The rest of the day passes with me barely lifting my eyes from the screen. At one point, Simona brings me a sandwich, and I can't resist pulling her into my lap for a few minutes of peace, a few minutes where my head isn't swimming with abducted women and the horror they're going through. I cling to her, letting her sweetness wash over me until I have no choice but to get back to work.

I don't push my chair back until it's time for me to get ready for the party at Tom's house. I've pushed it to the last minute, and Simona's already in the bathroom getting ready when I step into the closet and grab a dark suit. I strip quickly and start getting dressed. The suit covers most of my tattoos, but there's no covering the ones on my neck and hands. Roman's the only one who's kept that skin ink free, and that's why he's the one to meet with all the politicians and men in high positions. He can look respectable when he needs to; the rest of us will always look like well-dressed thugs.

I've just finished with my tie when I hear the bathroom door open. As soon as I turn around and see her, my whole body goes still. She's wearing the blue dress I picked out, the one that matches her eyes perfectly, and she's paired it with a pair of black heels that make her legs look fucking amazing. Her dark hair is down, brushing lightly against her shoulders, and her makeup has every part of me itching to ruin it. I want to smear the dark lipstick with my cock and watch the black mascara bleed across her cheeks as she gags and chokes on me.

She looks like an angel, a sweet, innocent angel who's just dying to get desecrated, and I suddenly don't trust myself around her at all. When I make no move to go to her, she starts to fidget, no doubt reading the situation completely wrong.

"Should I change?" she whispers, looking down at the dress while her fingers tap out a fast, agitated rhythm against her thigh.

"Absolutely not," I manage to say, but it comes out sounding like a growl when I'm trying so damn hard to be gentle.

She takes a hesitant step towards me, and I grip the doorway I'm standing in, digging my fingers into the wood to keep from ripping that

dress off her luscious body. The curve of her hips taunt me with each step she takes, and by the time she's standing in front of me, I'm barely hanging on.

"Do you not like it?" She searches my eyes, and whatever she sees has her sucking in a quick breath.

Unable to resist, I bring one hand down and run my fingers over the soft fabric before dragging them along the swell of her breasts. Way too much of her is exposed, and I'm not sure I can go through with this.

"What's wrong?" she asks, when I'm still quiet, too mesmerized by her to form words. "Does it look bad? Do you not like it?"

Her worry is what finally kicks my ass into gear. I can't stand the thought of her not knowing exactly how I feel, so I cup her face and close the distance between us. My lips graze hers, but I don't kiss her. I just breathe in her scent, filling my lungs with her.

"You look beautiful, *sladkaya*, so beautiful and so fucking sexy, and I don't know how in the hell I'm going to get through tonight."

"We'll get through it together," she whispers, letting me feel the heat of her breath on my lips. "Just don't leave me alone, Danil."

"Never," I tell her, cupping her face and pulling back just enough so she can see my eyes. "I swear to you that I'll keep you safe. If anyone dares to touch you, I will fucking kill them."

I mean every word of it, and I know she can see the truth of it in my eyes.

"I hope you're not too attached to that lipstick, baby, because I'm about to mess it up."

I don't give her a chance to answer. I press my lips to her and kiss her like my life depends on it, because it's quickly beginning to feel that way. Even with her heels on, she's still several inches shorter than me, and when I slide my hands down to cup her ass so I can pick her up, she quickly wraps her legs around me, making her ridiculously short dress ride up even more.

A groan rips from me when I feel the tiny thong she's wearing. My palm is full of one perfect, bare ass cheek, and I'm about two seconds from taking her to bed and forgetting all about this stupid fucking party when there's a loud knock at my door followed by Vitaly's voice.

"Hey, we're ready when you are." Then he laughs and adds in Russian, "I thought I heard a moan. What are you doing in there, Danil? Are you

doing another lap dancing lesson without me?”

“We’ll be right there,” I yell at him, but he just laughs harder before walking away.

Simona is breathing heavily, eyes heavy-lidded, lips swollen and her red lipstick is an absolute mess.

“God, you look so fucking sexy, baby.”

She smiles and runs her thumb over my lips. I have no doubt I’m wearing most of her lipstick right now, and I couldn’t give the slightest fuck about it. All I can think about is tasting her again.

“There,” she whispers when she’s got it all rubbed off of me. “I guess we need to get back into owner-pet mode. You should probably put me down,” she says and then gives me a wicked grin before adding, “sir.”

There’s no way in hell she doesn’t feel the twitch my cock gives, because fuck do I like the sound of that. I wasn’t lying about being a control freak, and the thought of Simona down on her knees and calling me sir, goddamn. I didn’t think I could get any harder, but she’s just proven me wrong.

She gives another smirk. “Interesting.”

“Careful, *sladkaya*. I’m barely hanging on as is.”

“I can behave,” she says, but there’s still a wicked glint in her blue eyes. She likes teasing me, likes seeing how far she can push me, and I have no doubt that she’ll get her answer very soon. She drives me fucking crazy, and she has no idea how close I am to losing all control.

I give her ass one last squeeze before kissing her neck and running my tongue over her pulse. “I’m not so sure you can, baby,” I whisper against her skin. “I think you like driving me crazy.”

“It’s more that I’m still stunned I can.”

I laugh against her skin and give her one last kiss before setting her down. “You definitely can,” I tell her, adjusting my cock as much as I’m able to, but it’s a stubborn son of a bitch and is content to stay rock hard for the foreseeable future.

She watches me as I get my gun, slipping it into the holster beneath my suit jacket before buttoning it up. I also have a couple of knives on me that she isn’t aware of, and my brothers will be armed too. Nothing will harm her tonight. I’m going to make damn sure of that.

With one last glance in the mirror, she fixes her hair and wipes off the ruined lipstick, not bothering to reapply it since we both know it’ll just get

smeared again. When she's ready, she looks up at me and takes a steadying breath.

"I'm ready."

I grab her hand and kiss the back of it. "We'll leave as soon as we can, and you'll be right next to me the entire time," I remind her.

She nods and gives me a small smile before we leave the room. On the way up the stairs, I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket, and when I pull it out and see Oleg's name on the screen, I quickly ignore the call and put my phone away.

"Everything okay?" Simona asks, seeing the annoyed look on my face.

"Yeah. Lev and Matvey thought it would be hilarious to give someone my personal number, and now he won't fucking stop calling me."

Lev hears me complaining and starts laughing. "Is Oleg still calling you? Did you hear that, Matvey?"

Matvey gives me a half smile from the kitchen. "You're going to have to change your number. He's never going to stop."

"He will when I fucking kill him," I say in Russian. We all know the Barinov brothers are on borrowed time. Once Pink takes off, we're not going to need them. They'll just be in the way, and we can't risk them fucking up our plans.

"Damn," Vitaly says, walking in and running his eyes over Simona. "That's one hell of a dress."

I shoot him a look over her head that lets him know I'm not enjoying this, and his smile grows.

"So are we pretending that she kind of belongs to all of us tonight?" he asks, because the bastard just never knows when to quit. "Like maybe she should sit in all our laps?"

When he sees my face, he gives Simona a playful wink and then says in Russian, "We still have the number for the guy who married Roman and Emily. Want me to give him a call now or later?"

My brothers have a good laugh at my expense while Simona and Emily wonder what the hell we're talking about.

"We should get going," I tell them, switching back to English.

"Sorry we can't come with you," Emily says, walking over to give Simona some support. "You'll be fine. Just stay close to Danil. Your tattoo will protect you. They all know what it means."

Simona nods, looking scared but determined to see this through to the end. We're all grateful to her for being willing to do this. She could've said no. None of us would've forced her to come tonight, but she wants to help, and I admire the hell out of her for it. I try not to think about how much danger I'm putting her in tonight. Like Emily said, no one's allowed to touch her, but we all know shit can go wrong. It sure as fuck did with her. Emily was kidnapped right under our goddamn noses, and if we'd been just five minutes later in finding her, we would've walked in on her being raped.

We'd killed the fuckers responsible, but that didn't erase what had already happened, the beating she took and the terror she went through. Roman had barely kept his shit together, and I know I'd be the exact same way if something happened to Simona. The thought has me tightening my grip on her hand. She will be glued to my goddamn side tonight.

She gives my hand a squeeze and smiles. "It's going to be okay," she says, trying to reassure me.

I pull her closer and kiss her cheek. "I'm the one who comforts you, *sladkaya*," I whisper in her ear. "You don't need to worry about me."

She gives a soft laugh. "That's ridiculous, Danil. I can comfort you all I want."

Even though I'm worried about her and dreading tonight, she still manages to pull a laugh from me.

"Okay, let's get this fucking over with," I say as we all head for the elevator.

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Chapter 8

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Simona

I give Emily a smile before walking with Danil to the elevator with Lev and Vitaly beside us. The three of them look like the world's sexiest criminals while I look and feel like the discounted hooker they picked up for the night. I've never felt so out of place in my life, and I'd kill someone for a pair of jeans and some sneakers. My body feels too big for this dress, like I'm about to bust out of the damn thing if I sit or walk too fast.

I don't realize how much I'm fidgeting until Danil wraps his hand around my hip and pulls me up against him in the elevator. With my back to his chest, I lean against him, letting his presence comfort me in the way that only he can, in the way that no other man has ever been able to. His fingers dig into my hip, and just that one touch is enough to send a spark of pleasure all through me. That kiss he'd given me in the closet is still very fresh in my mind, and I'm not sure how I'm going to pull off acting like a woman who was just bought two days ago.

It feels like a lifetime since I first met Danil, and I no longer see him as the monster I initially thought he was. I can't go into this party looking like a lovestruck teenager, though. He's the scary man who bought me, the man who's used me repeatedly for his own pleasure, and I'm supposed to be terrified of him. He's not the only one who needs to play a part tonight. Everyone will be suspicious if I'm smiling and giving him lovey-dovey looks.

When the doors open, Lev smiles and says, "I'll drive." His dark hair is long enough to brush his collar, and his light blue eyes turn to Vitaly as we walk to the SUV. "I hope this party isn't as awkward as being at the Viper."

“I’m guessing it will be, but at least the women will probably be owned by someone so maybe we’ll be left alone,” Vitaly says.

Danil had said he hated getting the lap dances, and it looks like his brothers feel the same way. I just assumed they’d love having beautiful women in their lap, and the thought makes me feel guilty as I climb into the SUV. They know firsthand that these women don’t want to be there and that they’re being forced to do what they do. The kind of men who would enjoy forcing themselves on a woman are the same kind of men who took Alina, and Danil and his brothers are nothing like that.

Danil’s hand rests on my thigh as Lev drives us through the city. I look over at him, watching his beautiful face as the lights from outside give me glimpses of him. He turns and winks at me, sending a flutter through my chest and a warmth to my pussy. Yeah, I’m definitely going to have to up my acting skills with a quickness. The corner of his mouth quirks up, easily seeing the effect he has on me. His thumb caresses my thigh, and by the time Lev turns onto a long driveway, I’m so horny I can barely think.

When we go around a bend and the yard opens up to reveal an imposing mansion in the distance, fear starts to replace lust. This place is massive, like ridiculously so, and when we pass a large fountain, Vitaly laughs and says, “What a pretentious asshole. I bet you anything as soon as we walk in we’re going to see a large painting of him hanging on the wall. How much you wanna bet?” he asks, looking between Lev and Danil.”

“I no longer make bets with you,” Danil says with a laugh.

Vitaly looks back at me and shakes his head with an exaggerated groan. “You make a guy call you a sex god one time, and they never get over it.”

I laugh and say, “I heard about that.”

“Your man is just a sore loser,” Vitaly says with another laugh, and I can’t help but smile at Danil being called my man.

“I’m not a sore loser,” Danil corrects. “I’m just tired of you reminding me of your sex god status on a daily basis.”

“A daily basis? That’s absurd, and we both know it. It’s weekly at best.”

“All right, no more competition for the sex god title,” Lev says as we get closer. “We’re almost to the valet.”

“Of course he has a valet,” Vitaly says. “I guess it would kill these bastards to park their own cars and walk a hundred feet to the fucking door.” He turns to look back at us. “Okay, showtime you two. Don’t forget to show off those lap dancing skills, Simona.”

“We’re not doing that,” Danil quickly says.

Vitaly laughs. “Well at least try to look the part. You two look way too fucking happy.”

“He’s right,” Danil says. Before we get to the valet, he cups my face and gives me a soft kiss. It’s not like the one in the closet, but it still makes my toes want to curl. “It’s just for show, baby,” he whispers against my lips.

“I know. It’s okay. I’ll be fine.”

His thumb caresses my cheek one last time before the SUV stops and everything changes. Like clockwork, the three men around me shift into the roles they need to play. No more joking around and easy smiles. They’re all hard edges and grim faces. We get out, and even though Danil holds his hand out for me and gives it a soft squeeze, his eyes are hard, and when he pulls me up against him, he keeps his body rigid beside mine instead of leaning down to kiss my cheek like he normally would.

Lev hands the keys over before we all walk to the front door. I can hear the low thrum of music, and when the doors open, there’s a man in a tux with a slimy grin on his face. He eyes me in a way that reminds me of what we’re walking into. This pervert is the reminder I needed. My eyes drop as I take on the submissive attitude that’s expected of me.

“Name?” the man asks.

“I’m Danil Melnikov, and these are my brothers Lev and Vitaly.”

“And your pet?” the man asks.

“Is mine.”

Danil’s hard tone makes the man give a surprised laugh. “I guess I’m not surprised you’re so possessive. I heard how much you paid for her.”

“And you are?” Danil asks.

“The butler,” the man says with another laugh. “Mr. Jacobson gives me special privileges for being so loyal and discreet.”

I see his expensive black shoes step back as he adds, “Please, come in. Is this your first after-auction party?”

“It is,” Danil says.

“There aren’t many rules, but the ones we have must be followed. As we all know, a woman with a black viper ouroboros tattoo can’t be touched by anyone other than her owner, but there are exceptions at parties like these.”

Danil’s fingers tighten on my hip at the man’s words. “What do you mean?”

“If you want,” the man continues, “you can have her wear a silver bracelet. It means you’re willing to share her, but only if they ask and you agree.”

I dart my eyes up to see the silver bracelet he’s offering Danil. My blood runs cold at the sight of it.

“I will not be sharing her,” Danil says, and his tone is hard enough to make the guy swallow and quickly put the bracelet back in his pocket.

“Very well, if you change your mind, you know where to find me.” He points to the hallway behind him. “The others are at the back of the house. Mr. Jacobson asks that everyone stay in that area instead of wandering around. Enjoy your evening.”

We walk down the marble floor, and when I look over at the grand entryway and see the large oil painting of Tom hanging front and center, I can’t help myself. I reach out, giving the sleeve of Vitaly’s suit a quick tug. When he looks at me, I nod my head towards the huge painting. His whiskey-colored eyes light up before he elbows Lev and says something in Russian.

“That’s why I didn’t make the bet,” Danil says low enough for just me to hear. When I look up at him, he gives me a quick wink before his face goes hard again.

I’m not sure what exactly I’m expecting, but when we come to the end of the hall and see the large room in front of us filled with naked or half-naked women, this isn’t it. I was thinking it would be similar to the Viper, sleazy men and half-naked women, but some pretense of civility, even if it was flimsy at best. This is like some drunken college party, except it’s being thrown by a man old enough to be my fucking grandpa.

The room itself is massive, and the entire wall of windows is one big sliding door that’s been opened up so guests can easily go from inside to outside. There’s a large pool that several people are currently skinny-dipping in, and when I hear a moan and look towards the corner of the room it’s coming from, I see a naked woman on her knees, giving some guy in a suit a blowjob, and if I thought I could get away with it, my ass would be running right back out the front door.

Danil mutters something in Russian and pulls me closer. Switching to English, he whispers close to my ear, “I can’t believe I fucking brought you into this place. I’m so sorry, *sladkaya*.”

“There you are!”

We all turn at the loud greeting to see Tom striding towards us with a naked woman trailing a few steps behind. I recognize her. She'd been standing next to me before we had to put the hoods over our heads. I'm pretty sure she's the woman whose hand I clutched on the way to the auction. Her eyes briefly meet mine before she puts them back on the floor. She looks broken, completely defeated and terrified and a stab of guilt hits me hard. She's been suffering this whole time while I've been laughing and living it up with Danil. I feel sick to my stomach when I look around the room, forcing myself to take in every fucking detail of it, all the women being used, the scared faces, the bruised bodies, and the way they're being passed around like they're worthless—this could've so easily been my fate. Why wasn't it? What makes me so fucking special? Not a goddamn thing, that's what.

I feel Danil's eyes on me. I know he senses something is wrong, but he has no idea what, and Tom is still talking like a jackass, oblivious to everything except himself.

"Not willing to share your pet, I see," he says, gesturing to my wrist and the lack of a silver bracelet.

"No, I'm not," Danil says.

I notice he has a bracelet on the woman he bought, and it doesn't take him long at all to say, "Well, I'm feeling generous tonight, so, Danil, if you or one of your brothers wants to sample my pet, she's yours for the taking." He lets out a drunken laugh, and says, "Tightest fucking pussy I've ever had."

I've never wanted to kill someone so badly in my life. I can't believe this fucker has a wife and grandkids. Their smiling fucking faces are plastered all over the photos on the walls around us. He didn't even bother to take them down.

"No, thanks," Danil says.

"Maybe later," Vitaly says.

"Yeah, I'd like to walk around and see everything first," Lev adds.

I know they're both stalling and hoping that Tom is drunk enough to not offer her again. Tom shrugs and grabs the young woman by the arm, pulling her back towards the pool.

"You know where to find us," he says with a laugh.

I meet her eyes for just a second, and the pain in them is like a slap to my face. Feeling like absolute shit, I let Danil lead me over to the bar that's

been set up in the corner. There's a topless woman who's apparently on bartending duty. Her viper tattoo is red, so she must be on loan from the Red Viper.

Danil brings his mouth close to my ear. "Do you want a drink, baby?"

"God yes," I tell him.

He rubs his hand along my back and asks the woman for four vodkas. She gives him a big, flirty smile that he ignores, but I see Vitaly discreetly slip her a tip so the men around us won't see. Hopefully, she'll get to keep it instead of having to hand it all over at the end of the night.

With drinks in hand, we walk over to a vacant couch in the corner. Danil pulls me onto his lap, keeping me pressed tightly against him.

"Anyone look familiar?" he asks, making sure to keep his voice low.

I take a drink and scan the crowded room. Most everyone is caught up in their own thing and not paying attention to us, but as I look around, I notice that more and more men are glancing my way.

"Word's spreading," Lev mutters from beside us. "They all want to catch a glimpse of the woman who went for such a high bid and the man who was willing to pay it."

"No one looks familiar," I whisper by Danil's ear. "This isn't going to cut it. We can't just stay in this room, and I swear to god we're not leaving this fucked-up party until we find something. If we can find his computer, will that help?"

"Yeah, but that's not going to be easy. I'm guessing his staff is on the lookout for anyone who tries to leave this room. They want everything done in the open."

My brain is racing, trying to come up with some reason for us to leave this room. There's a bathroom right off this room that people are using, so going in search of one isn't a good enough reason, and when I see Tom walk back in and turn his eyes on us, I make the decision to do something truly insane.

"Remember you like things private," I hurry up and whisper. "Just follow my lead."

"What are you—" he starts to say, but I cut him off when I scramble to my feet like my ass is on fire.

Turning to him, I have just enough time to shoot him an *I really hope this doesn't backfire and please don't be mad at me* look before I scream,

“No! I don’t want to suck your cock again, and you can’t fucking make me!”

I see the shock in his eyes before he quickly recovers. His face goes hard, and the room around us goes deathly still. I made sure to scream it loud enough so everyone would hear, and it looks like I’ve succeeded. Without taking his eyes off mine, he says something in Russian to his brothers. I don’t dare look at them. I’m having a hard enough time going through with this as is.

There’s not a speck of warmth in the grey eyes that I’ve come to love when he calmly stands and takes a step towards me. When I take a step back, it’s not all for show. This is the side of Danil that he keeps hidden from me, but because of my spur-of-the-moment plan, he has no choice but to put his dark and deadly side on full display and aimed directly at me.

I bite my bottom lip and his eyes briefly flick down to my fidgeting fingers. He stalks towards me, there’s no other way to describe it. His powerful body is nothing but fierce, fluid movement that puts him right in front of me in seconds. He gives me a wicked smirk and cups the back of my head, fisting my hair in a tight enough grasp to make me wince.

“You sure you don’t want to share her tonight?” Tom yells, making the men around him give a few soft chuckles. “That would teach her to open her pretty mouth when she’s told.”

Danil’s jaw tenses, but he keeps his eyes locked on mine when he says, “No one touches my girl but me.” He looks over at Tom. “I do require a room so I can discipline her properly. I can’t let this go unpunished.”

“Oh, let us watch,” Tom says, and he sounds like a pouting teenage girl who’s just been told she can’t go out this Friday night.

“I don’t like an audience, Tom. This is between me and my pet.” He fists my hair tighter and pulls me closer to his side, but he also caresses my scalp with his thumb as he does it. It doesn’t take the sting away, but it’s still a comfort and immediately makes me feel better.

Tom laughs and waves a hand towards the door we came in. “Take your pick.” He gives another drunken laugh. “At least make her scream loud enough for us all to hear.”

When Danil spins me around, I catch a quick glimpse of his brothers. Vitaly’s giving me an amused smirk, and Lev’s quirking a pierced brow at me in a *what the fuck have you gotten yourself into* kind of way.

I let out a yelp when Danil starts dragging me to the door. My high-heeled feet have to work hard to keep up with him, and he's not letting up on my hair. I gotta say, we're playing the part beautifully. For all intents and purposes, I very much look like the pet who's pissed off her master by refusing to get on her knees. His grip on my hair is strong, but he's being careful to not let it hurt too much. He's giving me what I can take, but no more.

Even after leaving the room, we keep up the charade because we're not sure who may be watching. Danil drags me down the hall and up a flight of stairs. He doesn't say a word, but I can tell he's not pleased with the plan I came up with. After opening a couple of doors, he finds Tom's office and pulls me in. As soon as the door shuts, he lets go of my hair and cups my face.

"What the fuck were you thinking, baby?"

"I was thinking that we needed a reason to leave the party." I give a small shrug. "It was a split-second decision. It was all I could come up with."

He lets out a pained groan and kisses my forehead.

"I don't understand. Why are you so upset?"

"Because they think I'm disciplining you."

"So? Can't you just tell them that you did?"

He sighs and runs a finger down my cheek. "You don't look like you've just been disciplined, *sladkaya*." His fingers trail down my neck before dancing along my clavicle. "You're wearing very little tonight, and all this flesh is unmarked."

"Fuck," I whisper, because I hadn't thought of that. I thought we could just disappear and I'd go back with my head hung in shame and that would be that. He's right, though. I've made too big of a show of this, and Tom is going to be looking for results.

I look up, meeting the grey eyes that are now softened with concern and something else, something that goes far beyond that, but I can't sort through all that right now. We don't have the time.

"Then do it," I whisper.

His eyes narrow as he whispers, "What the fuck are you suggesting? Because if it's that I hit you, I don't want to fucking hear it."

"No, not hit me, but maybe you could mark me some other way."

I reach up and wrap my hand around his, bringing it back up to my neck. His eyes darken as I wrap his fingers around me. He'd held me like this when he'd made me come, and I'd liked it. I'd liked it a lot, and I know he did too. His breathing has already deepened, and his pupils are blown, making his eyes look darker, hungrier, and all of it is directed at me.

"Do you feel how fast my heart is beating?" I ask him, walking backwards until I'm pinned between the door and his powerful body. If I had any doubts about him liking his hand around my neck, they dissolve when I feel the hard length of him press against my hip.

"I know you like to be in control," I whisper, squeezing my hand on top of his, tightening his grip on me until I feel my airway start to constrict. "So be in control, Danil. I trust you."

"Fuck," he growls, bringing his lips close to mine. "Are you sure, *sladkaya*?"

He drags his free hand down my side, hooking his finger under my skirt before slowly teasing his way up my inner thigh.

"I'm sure," I whisper. I have no clue what's about to happen, but I trust him. I trust him completely.

"If we're going to do this, then we're doing it my way."

I smile at his words. "I never doubted that for a second."

He gives me a sexy smirk before giving my bottom lip a soft bite. "I'm going to mark your body, baby, but I promise you're going to enjoy every fucking second of it. I need you to promise me something first, though."

He drags his finger along my slit, and my knees nearly buckle at how fucking good it feels. "Anything," I say in a breathy rush, knowing it's true. I'd promise him any goddamn thing right now as long as he doesn't stop.

His soft laugh skirts across my lips. "Tap me if it's too much. Promise me you won't let me go too far."

"I won't. I promise."

He searches my eyes, making sure I'm telling the truth before he tightens his fingers, cutting off my air as he roughly pushes my panties aside and buries a finger inside me. My eyes widen at the feel of him, and when my body instinctively tries to suck in a deep breath, I can't, and that's when the panic starts to set in. It's ridiculous. I can hold my breath longer than this, but there's something about knowing that I can't take a breath that makes me really fucking want one.

“Easy, baby,” he murmurs against my lips. He nibbles on my top lip, the kisses so fucking gentle and sweet while he finger fucks me hard and fast and tightens his grip on my neck. It hurts, and it’s definitely going to leave a fucking mark, but that doesn’t stop the pleasure from building inside me. There’s something about being completely at his mercy that’s turning me the fuck on, and when I rock my hips, I feel him smile against me before he slides his soaked finger out and pinches my clit. He rolls my sensitive nub between his fingers, pinching and rolling until dots start to appear in my vision, and just when I’m convinced I’m going to pass out, he loosens his fingers and I suck in a quick lungful of air.

The sensation is fucking euphoric. All my senses light up as the oxygen rushes into me. I only have seconds to enjoy it, though, because right as I fill my lungs, he tightens his grip again, stealing my next breath as he keeps my clit in a tight grip that has my whole body shaking.

“You have no idea what you’re unleashing here,” he murmurs against my lips. “Giving a man who loves control complete power over you—baby, that was a big mistake.”

He kisses and nips at my jaw, working his way to my ear. Giving my earlobe a not-so-gentle bite, he whispers, “I’m going to fucking ruin you, baby, and you’re going to let me.” He pinches my clit harder. “You’re going to beg me to.”

He’s not wrong. One of my hands grips his forearm, clutching at him while my other hand falls lower so I can feel the hard length of him against my palm. He groans and thrusts against me. Giving my clit one more hard pinch before rubbing away the sting, and just like that the dam bursts. Right as the orgasm hits, he releases his grip. The rush of oxygen mixes with my release until the pleasure is so strong it fucking blinds me. My legs turn to jelly, and it’s only his hand on my pussy that’s keeping me upright.

“That’s my good girl,” he purrs in my ear. “Fucking soak my hand, baby.” He slides two fingers into me while letting out a string of fast Russian. “God, you’re so fucking tight,” he growls in English. “Mine, *sladkaya*.” His whisper is hoarse and feral sounding. “You are *mine*.”

“Yes,” I whisper while he keeps working me, quickly bringing me close to the edge again.

“Not because I bought you, and not because of that fucking tattoo, but because you were mine the second I saw you.” He kisses his way back to

my lips. “You’re mine because I’m falling so fucking hard for you, and you’re mine because I can’t let you go.”

I want to tell him that yes, I’m his and only his, but he brushes my clit with his thumb, and the only thing I can do is moan his name and cling to him for dear life while he kisses me so hard it steals my breath just like his hand was doing only seconds before. I rock against him and massage his cock through his pants, wishing like hell my pussy was pulsing around him instead of his fingers. I want to feel that thickness inside me. I want to feel the sting it’s going to bring. I want to feel like he’s breaking me in two.

When I start to come down, he rests his forehead against mine, both of us gasping for air. I run my fingers along his thick cock, pulling another deep groan from him.

“I need you,” I whisper.

“You have me, *sladkaya*. Every fucking part of me is yours.”

I smile and bring my hands to the button of his pants. “Then let me have you.”

His hand rests on top of mine, stilling my greedy fingers. “I’m not taking your virginity here.”

I know he’s serious and that there’s no way in hell I want to lose my virginity in Tom’s fucking office, but that doesn’t mean we can’t do something else. I embrace that adventurous gene that I apparently do have, just not in the way I imagined, and give him another smile.

“My neck will be red, but it’s not enough. I need to cry, Danil,” I say, fisting the front of his suit and pulling him closer. “I need to walk out of here with my makeup a mess and tears running down my face.” I run my tongue over his bottom lip before giving it a soft suck and whispering, “Make me cry, sir,” against his lips.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he growls, letting go of my hand so I can undo his pants while he kisses me hard. “Knees,” he says when I’ve unzipped his pants. “Right fucking now.”

I drop to my knees and look up at him. His eyes are a stormy grey, and he looks like a man who’s right on the edge of losing control, like a man who’s two seconds away from devouring me whole. He reaches in and pulls out his cock, and when I see how impossibly huge he is, a spark of fear flits through me, but I’m not about to back out now. I want this. I want him, and I’m damn well going to get him.

“Open.”

That one word spoken in his deep, accented voice is enough to have me opening my mouth as another rush of pleasure hits me right between my legs. He looks down at me, cupping my face and running his thumb over my bottom lip before gripping my jaw and forcing my mouth open even more.

“Wider, *sladkaya*, or I won’t fit.”

My mouth already aches and we haven’t even started. I’m not completely convinced I’m going to be able to take him all the way in. Hell, I’m not entirely convinced it’s even physically possible, but I want to try. I want to make him feel good, and I want to see him fall apart at my touch.

His fingers slide into my mouth, filling the space and almost making me gag.

“Suck.”

I close my lips around him and suck on the three fingers filling my mouth. He’s eyes go heavy-lidded as I run my tongue over him and suck him in even further.

“Good fucking girl,” he groans, and those three words have every part of my body tingling with need. He slowly slides his fingers out, letting me suck him the whole way before he threads his hand through my hair, fisting it again while his other hand grips his shaft, guiding his thick head to my waiting lips.

“You sure you want to cry, baby?” he asks, dragging his head along my bottom lip, coating me in his pre-cum. “Because I’m more than ready to give you what you want, but I need you to be sure it’s what you actually want.”

I run my tongue over him, making him hiss out a breath when I probe his slit, hungry for more of his salty taste.

“It’s going to hurt,” he warns. “The way you want it means that I’m going to be fucking this sweet mouth hard, and I need you to tell me now if you don’t want that.”

“I want it,” I tell him, reaching out to grip his thighs.

“Then fucking take it, sweetheart,” he growls, sliding his cock between my lips. He keeps his hand fisted in my hair as he rocks his hips, thrusting into me harder, pushing past my gag reflex, not stopping until he’s buried in my throat and blocking my air supply in a completely different way. Fast Russian fills the space around us as Danil forgets his English. His eyes never leave mine. He holds me still, watching as my eyes threaten to spill

over and my body struggles to breathe. I try like hell to fight how badly my body wants to gag. His thick cock makes it impossible to do anything. All I can do is kneel, impaled on his giant dick as he towers over me.

"You look so fucking sexy, *sladkaya*." His voice is barely more than a growl. He runs his thumb along my stretched-out lips. "This sweet mouth was made to take my cock."

My lungs scream for air, but he keeps me right where I'm at, denying me oxygen and demanding my submission. I give it. I willingly submit to him, forcing my body to be still even as every survival instinct I have is demanding I pull back and get some goddamn air.

"I'm going to fuck you hard, baby," he warns me, fisting my hair tighter. "And you're going to take it like a good girl, aren't you?"

"Mm-hmm," I moan around his cock, already feeling a little lightheaded from the lack of oxygen. I know if I tapped his leg, he'd immediately back off, but I don't want to. I want him to use me, to fuck my mouth as hard as he wants. I want to give him this. I want to give him *me*.

He brushes the back of his fingers against my cheek in one last soft caress before he tightens his grip on my hair and pulls back, sliding his length out of me so I can take a much-needed breath. The reprieve doesn't last long. As soon as I fill my lungs, he slams back into me. Just like he promised, he fucks me hard, and it does hurt. I gag as spit drips from my mouth and tears spill down my face. The sight of it pulls a feral-sounding growl from him as he fucks me even harder. This is the wild, untamed side of Danil that I wanted to see, and the sight is everything I knew it would be. The dangerous man standing above me looks exactly like what he is—a fierce killer who could end me so easily. His grey eyes are dark and wild, the muscles in his neck taut as his veins stick out, and his chest heaving with his ragged breaths.

I fucking love it.

He growls my name as he gives one last thrust, burying himself inside me as his cock pulses, and I feel the wet heat of him hit the back of my throat. He feels me trying to swallow, my throat constricting around the head of his cock, and it pulls another deep groan from him as he pulses yet again, emptying himself of every damn thing he has.

When I feel him start to grow soft, I clutch at his thighs and slowly lift my head, sucking him the whole way until he's released with an audible wet pop. Spit still drips from my chin, my mouth and throat ache, my lips are

numb, and I'm pretty sure I look an absolute mess, but I've never been so damn proud of anything in my life. I just made this sexy man growl my name and lose all control. If that's not a life goal I can check off my list, then I don't know what is.

Kneeling down, he cups my face and brings his lips to mine, kissing me slowly and oh so fucking gently. When he tastes himself on my tongue, he lets out another groan and massages the sting from my scalp.

He pulls back to look at me, worried grey eyes studying every detail of my face. "Was I too rough?"

"No," I whisper. My voice is raspy and my throat is sore, but that doesn't stop the big smile I'm wearing. "Do I look like I've been properly chastised?"

His thumb swipes at my wet cheeks, no doubt smearing my mascara even more. "You look so goddamn beautiful, baby."

He tilts my chin, lifting my face so he can see my neck, and when he sees the damage, he lets out a pained groan. His fingers run over the sore skin.

"I was too rough," he says, and his voice is so low I have to strain to hear it.

I grab his hand and squeeze it. "No, you weren't. I wanted you to, Danil." My lips find his again, and I whisper, "I liked it, and I want to do it again." I look around Tom's office. "Just maybe not here."

Danil gives me a soft smile and one more kiss before tucking himself back in his pants and then helping me to my feet.

"We don't have much time. I need to hurry up and see what I can get off his computer."

I watch him walk over to Tom's laptop. I'm just about to ask how he's going to get past the password, but his fingers are already flying across the keyboard, opening the damn thing up. I love watching Danil work his magic. I've never been too great with computers, but Danil understands them on a deep level. He speaks their language, and he's already unearthing all of Tom's dirty little secrets.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a flash drive and connects it to the laptop. A few minutes later, he's pulling it out and giving me a wink.

"Got it, baby."

His smile grows when I say, "I never doubted you for a second."

He pockets the flash drive and pulls me closer, wrapping me in a tight embrace, giving us these few seconds of comfort before we have to go back out there.

"Ready, *sladkaya*?"

"Yeah, let's get this over with."

When we get to the door, I let go of him and stand behind him. He looks over his shoulder at me and lifts a brow.

"I should walk behind you. You should probably act like you're still pissed at me."

He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me back up next to him. "Fuck that, baby. I disciplined you, and the discretion is forgotten. I can handle my pet any goddamn way I want."

I smile and lean in to give his chest a kiss. "Fine, but I'm still going to act super submissive out there."

"Looking forward to it," he says with a grin, and I have to bite back my laugh when he opens the door and we walk back into the hallway and down the stairs. It makes me feel lousy to joke around when there's so much horrific shit going on around us, but if we don't find something to laugh about, we'll both go fucking crazy.

We pass a few people on the way back to the main room, but I'm not sure who it is because I keep my head down. Danil's fingers give my hip a soft squeeze as we walk into the main room. I look up just long enough to see Vitaly and Lev sitting with Tom and a few other men. I have no doubt they were digging for information and keeping Tom from leaving to check on us.

"Looks like someone's learned her lesson," Tom says, and I feel Danil's body stiffen in anger.

Without giving him a response, Danil leads me back to the couch and sits down. Instead of getting into his lap, I keep my head ducked low and kneel between his legs, resting my head on his lap in a submissive *I'm so sorry I pissed off my owner* kind of way, or at least I hope that's what it looks like.

When I lift my eyes, Danil's staring at me, giving me a heated look that sends my heart racing. His fingers run down my cheek before he rests his hand on my head and, there's really no other way to describe it, pets me. This should be demeaning. I should be thoroughly pissed about having to be in this position, but I'm too busy trying not to arch my back and purr like a

goddamn cat for him. It's ridiculously soothing, and when my eyes drift closed, I hear him give a soft laugh.

After a few minutes, his brothers come back and they start having a conversation in Russian. Danil keeps softly stroking my head until a couple of other men walk over to introduce themselves. I discreetly look up at the two men, making sure I don't recognize them, and when I meet Danil's eyes, I give a soft shake of my head to let him know I've never seen them before.

"We just wanted to introduce ourselves to the man who set a bidding record," one of the men says. He holds out a hand to Danil. "I'm Steve, and this is Gary."

"We were at the auction too," Gary adds, shaking Danil's hand after Steve. "Couldn't swing the price tag you got her for, though." He lets out a soft laugh and runs his eyes over me like I'm not even human. The lust in his brown eyes has Danil's fingers stilling in my hair for just a second, just long enough for me to know he's getting angry.

"Is she worth it?" Steve asks.

"Every fucking penny," Danil says, and I tilt my head enough to give his thigh a kiss. He strokes my cheek with the back of his other hand.

"Does she understand you?" The amazement in Steve's voice is mixed with frustration when he adds, "The girl I bought can't understand a fucking word I say."

"She understands me," Danil says. He cups my face and runs his thumb over my swollen lips. "Even if she didn't know English, she would still understand me."

I look into his grey eyes and know he's right. He could switch to Russian right now, and I wouldn't understand a damn word of it, but I'd still recognize the heat in his eyes, the desire that radiates off his body and flows into mine, the strength in his hands when he grips my neck but also the gentleness in them that lets me know I'm safe with him, no matter what.

"I guess I need to work on my nonverbal skills," Steve jokes.

I'm guessing Steve needs to work on a lot of skills, but I keep my mouth shut like a good submissive pet and nestle my face against Danil's strong thigh. He goes back to petting me, and when I meet his eyes again, he gives me a wink that sends a shot of pleasure straight to my pussy.

Part of me feels like I'm going straight to hell for being so happy in the middle of Tom's fucked-up party, but the other part of me is just so fucking

grateful that it’s Danil who I’m kneeling for and that it’s his hands on me and not these sick fucks around me. I’m going to do everything I can to help them and to help find Alina so the men responsible for all this will be taken down, but I can’t shut my heart off, and it very much belongs to the beautiful Russian in front of me.

While his brothers join in the conversation, I listen as they gently probe for information, but it soon becomes very obvious that no one knows who’s actually behind the auctions. I’m pretty sure none of them give a fuck either. They just want the women. They don’t give a rat’s ass how they come to be here, just as long as they show up with a for sale sign and a see-through dress.

I’m so caught up in eavesdropping that it takes me a second to notice the man who’s just come in the door. My hands clutch at Danil’s leg when the doctor who examined me meets my eyes from across the room and gives me a slimy grin.

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Chapter 9

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Danil

When I feel Simona's hands grab my leg and see the terror in her eyes, my first instinct is to pick her up and put her in my lap, so that's exactly what I do. Ignoring the men around me, I wrap my arms around her and cup the back of her head.

"What's wrong?" I keep my voice low, whispering in her ear so only she can hear me. "Do you recognize someone?"

"Yes." Her whisper is shaky and soft, just a slight tickle of warmth against the shell of my ear, but it's enough to turn the blood in my veins to fire. I look around the room, trying to spot anyone new. There were nineteen people in this room less than a minute ago with another twenty-five mingling outside around the pool. I've been keeping tabs on everyone, and the only difference is the old fucker who's standing in the corner with a drink in hand and a creepy smile on his face.

"Who is he?"

"The doctor" is all she says, and it's enough. I don't need to know anything else, because I remember every goddamn word she said. Images of Simona being held down while the man in front of me fingers her and jacks off is all I can see. I look at the man who dared to touch what belongs to me. He touched *my* woman, shot his fucking seed onto her beautiful skin, and he's going to pay for it with his life.

Kissing Simona's cheek, I keep her held against me and turn to my brothers. I tell them in Russian who the man is, and when I see their eyes light up at the violence that's about to take place, I know this is exactly what we all needed. Killing the men who attacked Emily was weeks ago,

and we’re all eager to shed some more blood. It’s been too goddamn long since we’ve been able to get our hands dirty.

Vitaly and Lev keep their eyes on the man while I dig my phone out and call Matvey. He answers immediately.

“You ready to get your hands bloody again?”

I hear the excitement in his voice when he asks, “She recognized someone?”

“She did. I need you to find someone who speaks Romanian.”

“Timofey’s mom is from Romania,” Vitaly says.

“Perfect. Did you hear that?” I ask Matvey.

“Yeah, I’m on it. We’ll meet you at the warehouse.”

“Send a couple of our men to the penthouse to watch Simona and Emily. We’ll drop her off on our way.”

“I’ll call them now.”

“Thanks, man.”

I hang up and tell Vitaly and Lev that Matvey’s going to meet us at the old warehouse we bought just for occasions such as this. We knew at some point we’d have to have a place to question people and that it needed to be somewhere private, somewhere we could hold a person and not have their screams heard. The location is an hour away, but every mile of that drive is going to be worth it.

Excited by the knowledge that I’m going to be torturing this sick fuck very soon, I smile and keep stroking Simona’s head. We keep talking to the men around us, holding up our end of the conversation while watching the man slowly make his way around the room. He doesn’t try to speak to anyone, just eye-fucks the women that he’s assaulted. I see the fear in their eyes when they notice him, and I have no doubt that he did the same damn thing to all of them that he did to Simona.

I’m momentarily sidetracked when a man walks over to us. The suit he’s wearing is as expensive as mine, which is saying a lot, and he looks to be only a few years older than me, probably early thirties, which puts us both way younger than the other men here. His dark eyes run over Simona before he meets mine and offers me his hand.

“I wanted to come and introduce myself to the man who outbid me. I’m Dominic.”

His tone is light, but it’s forced. I can hear the edge to it, and I know he’s not pleased that I outbid him. I recognize the look in his eyes. He’s not

a man who's used to losing. I shake his hand, studying the man who would be holding Simona right now if I hadn't been there, and I want to kill him. I want to take out my gun and shoot him until there's nothing left of him for daring to even think about possessing what's mine. I've turned completely feral where Simona is concerned, and I can't switch it off.

Instead of killing him, I say, "Nice to meet you, Dominic. I'm Danil, and these are my brothers, Lev and Vitaly."

He gives them a nod and then takes the chair next to me, never taking his eyes off Simona. She's still in my arms, keeping her eyes down, pretending to not be interested in our conversation, but I know she's listening, and I can feel her fingers playing a rhythm on my side where her hand has slipped under my jacket.

"I was very pissed at you," Dominic admits with a soft laugh. "I had to go home alone after the auction, which is not something I'm accustomed to. I've never been outbid before, and I really had my heart set on this one."

"I'm sure there will be other auctions," I tell him.

"There will be, yes, but that doesn't change the fact that I don't have her."

"No, you don't," I say, letting my anger creep into my voice.

He keeps his eyes on mine a few seconds longer than necessary before his lips quirk up and he lets out a soft laugh. "What if I offer you more?"

"You want to buy her from me?" I ask, unable to hide my own laugh at the audacity of this fucker.

"I do. I was able to move some funds around, and I'll pay whatever you want. Just name it, and it's yours."

"She's not for fucking sale," I growl out, barely keeping my temper in check.

He gives me that same smirky smile and leans forward. "I think you're forgetting what she is, and she's most definitely for sale. Everyone and everything is."

"She *was* for sale," I correct, "but I bought her, which means she's mine. Not yours."

His jaw tics, and I know he's just as pissed as I am. After several seconds of silence, he relents and asks, "How much for one night?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Fucking spoiled rich guys," Lev mutters in Russian beside me. I know he and Vitaly are listening in while keeping an eye on the doctor, and I can

tell they're getting just as pissed as me about this.

"I don't share," I tell him. "I understand you're not used to being told no, Dominic, so you might want to brace yourself for a life lesson. You don't always get what you want, and I'm going to say this slowly so there's no confusion. She is mine, and you will never have her."

I enunciate each word, speaking nice and slow so the smug jackass will understand me. After several seconds of silence, Dominic forces a smile that looks more like a grimace before he leans closer and says, "That mark on her neck is going to look beautiful when it bruises." Looking at Simona, he adds, "Be happy he won the bid, sweetheart. I would've done a lot worse for that stunt you pulled earlier."

Simona turns her head, burying her face against my neck as I tighten my grip on her. "I guess it's a good thing you lost the bid then," I say, just because I like the flicker of anger that runs through his eyes at the reminder that he did in fact lose. "Why don't you go mingle with the other guests, Dominic. Maybe someone else will let you rent their pet for the night."

I laugh, but he doesn't join in. He downs the rest of his drink and stands back up. "Maybe I'll see you at the next auction. I can promise it'll be the last fucking time I ever lose to you."

"Maybe," I say and leave it at that.

He walks off without another word, not bothering to stick around for the rest of the party. I'm positive he just came here so he could see Simona and try to buy her off me, and I know I'm not going to rest until I know every damn detail of his life. He's dangerous, and he wants Simona. That alone is enough to put him on my kill list, but it doesn't mean I can act on it anytime soon. Too many deaths will be suspicious, and the doctor is first on the list.

As if reading my mind, Lev says in Russian, "One thing at a time, Danil. He's an asshole, but the doctor needs to go first."

"Don't worry. I know."

"We need to lure him outside," Vitaly says. "Most of these fuckers are drunk or high and I doubt they'll notice if we slip out, but they're going to notice if we drag his ass out of here."

"What are you saying?" Simona whispers against my ear.

"Just trying to figure out how to get the doctor away from the party, *sladkaya*."

"I can help."

"I'm not putting you in danger," I tell her.

“You don’t have to. I’ll go out to the pool and catch his attention. Maybe I can get him to follow me away from everyone, and once we’re on the side of the house, then you guys can grab him. You’ll be able to keep your eyes on me the whole time.”

I think about it, and then I quickly say, “Fuck no. We’ll just grab him when he leaves.”

“He could be here all night,” she says loud enough for Vitaly to hear.

“She’s right,” he says, not looking even slightly ashamed at listening in.

“We won’t let her out of our sight,” Lev assures me, and I know he’s right, but I still don’t like it.

Simona kisses my neck and then starts to get up. “Come on, let’s just see what happens. If it works, we go for it, and if not, then we’ll do it your way and wait.”

I tighten my grip on her, not allowing her to leave my lap. Lev gets up first and slowly makes his way outside so he can watch her from the side of the house. Kissing her neck, I whisper against her skin, “If anyone touches you, scream for me. Scream as loud as you fucking can.”

“I will. I promise.”

It takes all my willpower to watch her stand up and walk away. A few sets of eyes follow her, but most everyone is way too drunk to give a shit, or way too busy fucking. I try very hard to ignore the fact that Tom’s involved in a threesome on the other side of the room. I have no desire to see his pasty, flabby ass, and I feel terrible for the two women who are forced to be with him, but I can’t risk everything to save them. I *won’t* risk everything to save them. When we take down the head of this snake, I hope like hell it trickles down to help them, but I’m not their knight in shining armor. I’m only willing to risk everything for one woman, and right now she’s walking her perfect ass out of the room—an innocent little sheep that I’ve just thrown to the wolves.

On the outside I look calm, but inside I’m raging and seconds away from cracking. I can easily see Simona walking to the pool. She stops to talk to some of the other women, but it’s obvious they don’t understand a word she’s saying, so she gives up and then looks over her shoulder at the doctor. He’s watching her from the shadows where he’s hidden himself on the veranda. He doesn’t take his eyes off her, and she plays her part perfectly. My sweet girl is learning how to play this game and it kills me to see it. She doesn’t give him a sexy smile or a cutesy wave. No, she lets him

see her fear, pretends she's just now recognizing him, and then she slowly stumbles away, like she's terrified and wants nothing more than to get away from him. She knows it's the fear he won't be able to resist, and like fucking clockwork, he steps out of the shadows. He looks in my direction, but I've already turned, pretending to be deep in conversation with Vitaly.

"Just think about how much fun it's going to be to kill him," Vitaly says, trying to keep me calm.

"It's going to be a very slow death," I say, watching the doctor start to follow Simona.

Vitaly and I get up, but while I head out the back, Vitaly goes for the front so he can get the SUV from the valet. In the backyard I look around, making sure no eyes are on me before following the path to the side of the house. Even though I trust Lev completely, my heart is still racing, and it doesn't slow down until I turn the corner and see Simona standing unharmed and nowhere near the pervy doctor because Lev already has him pressed against the house with his wrists zip-tied and a piece of tape over his mouth. I'm not at all surprised that Lev came here with supplies.

I close the distance, pulling Simona into my arms. She hugs me like she never wants to let me go, and I happily return it.

"Are you okay? Did he touch you?"

"No, Lev grabbed him before he could," she whispers against my chest.

Making sure Lev has the doctor, I give him a nod before telling Simona, "We need to go, baby."

I keep my arm around her as we walk to the front of the house. Lev keeps a firm grip on the doctor's arm while I make damn sure to keep several feet between us, because if I touch him now, I'm going to kill the fucking bastard. Vitaly is waiting for us at the curve of the driveway, parking so that the valets can't see the passenger side doors. We hurry up and get in, tossing the doctor into the backseat with more force than necessary before Lev sits down next to him and I pull Simona into my lap in the seat in front, keeping my body in between them.

"We're dropping Simona off at the penthouse," I tell Vitaly. "Matvey's sent a couple of our guys to stand watch until we can get back." Still speaking Russian, I turn to the man who's not going to live to see the sun rise and ask him, "Do you speak Russian?"

He shakes his head, trying to let me know that he doesn't understand. I meet his eyes. "I'm going to make you wish you were dead."

He may not understand a word I’m saying, but he understands it all the same. His eyes dart to the woman in my lap and then back up to mine, and that’s when the poor old doctor starts to sweat and shake and whimper, and that’s when I laugh.

“What are we doing?” Simona asks.

“We’re taking you back to the penthouse. Some of our men will be there watching over you and Emily while we’re gone.”

“You’re going to kill him, aren’t you?”

I kiss her cheek and tell her the truth. “Very slowly, *sladkaya*.”

Once we’re at the penthouse, I leave my brothers with the doctor so I can take Simona upstairs.

“Can you grab me a sweet tea?” Vitaly yells out the window.

“Me too!” Lev adds.

I shake my head at them and step into the elevator. As soon as the doors close, she pulls me closer and kisses me hard. I know she’s scared and worried and looking to me for comfort, and I’m more than happy to give it to her. I cup the back of her head, running my tongue over hers as memories of her on her knees float through my mind.

Pulling back, I run my fingers over her sore neck. “How bad does it hurt?”

“I’m fine,” she whispers.

I tilt her head and gently kiss the marks I left on her, torn between feeling guilty and wanting to wrap my fingers around her again while I bury myself in her sweet pussy and feel her heart flutter a frantic rhythm against my skin.

God, we should’ve never opened up this door.

“Be careful,” she whispers against my lips. “Promise me you’ll come back to me.”

The elevator stops, but I hit the button so the doors stay shut. “I promise I’ll come back to you, baby. I’ll always come back to you.”

She cups my face, keeping her forehead pressed against mine before finally giving a soft nod and letting me go. When I open the doors, Sergei and Aleksandr are waiting in the living room, watching a pacing Emily. As soon as she sees me, she rushes over to us.

“What’s going on, Danil? Roman and Matvey just ran out of here, said that Simona had recognized some man. Does he know where Alina is?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I tell her, leading Simona further into the room. “We’re going to find out what he knows, but we need Timofey to translate.” I kiss Simona’s head and say, “Wait here, baby. I’ll be right back.”

I grab the laptop that’s always sitting somewhere in the main area and bring it to the two men who’ve been trained to handle just about anything. When I open it, surveillance cameras fill the screen. Two show the parking garage and right outside the elevator, one shows inside the elevator, which would embarrass the hell out of Emily and Simona if they knew, and the last image rotates between several cameras situated around our building.

“This stays with you the whole fucking time we’re gone,” I tell them.

“Yes, sir,” Sergei says, already taking it from me while Aleksandr gives me a nod and then quickly drops his gaze.

I leave them with the computer and then quickly step outside onto the rooftop terrace and go to where Emily’s gardening supplies are. She’s been into container gardening the last couple of weeks, and when I see the pruning shears, I pocket them before going back inside. The two women are still standing where I left them, both of them look worried, and it’s the last thing I want, so I pull Simona into a hug and give Emily a smile.

“There’s nothing to worry about.” I meet my sister-in-law’s eyes and add, “I promise. We’re not in any danger. This is good fucking news, and we’re all excited about it, but there’s nothing for you two to worry about.”

“Why are there guards here?” Emily asks.

Without thinking, I say, “Because we’re ridiculously overprotective of the women we love.”

Emily’s eyes widen in surprise, and when I realize what I’ve said, I look down at Simona while Emily says, “Sergei, Aleksandr, let me show you where all the fun stuff is downstairs.”

Before they leave, I make sure Sergei is still carrying the laptop and then say in Russian, “Don’t you dare let them leave the penthouse, and no one comes up here but us.”

“Yes, sir,” they both say before following Emily, who’s desperately trying to save my ass and give us a little bit of privacy.

I run a hand through my hair and sigh. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to just blurt that out. I know it’s fast, and I know you’re dealing with a lot right now.”

Before I can keep going, she grabs my shoulders and pulls me down to her level. “I love you too,” she whispers right before she kisses me.

My arms wrap around her, and I allow myself to get lost in the feel and taste of her for as long as I can before I'm forced to pull back because I can't take her to bed like I so desperately want. Right now I need to deal with the man who's bound and gagged and waiting downstairs with my brothers.

"I love you," I whisper against her lips, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world, and that's enough to pull a small laugh from me.

"And that's funny?" she asks, giving me a smile.

"I just went from thinking I'd never fall in love to falling so hard for you in a ridiculously short amount of time. So, yeah, it's kind of funny." I kiss her again and then meet her blue eyes. "I'm sorry I have to go. I promise we'll talk more when I get back. Keep your phone close, baby. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Be careful, Danil."

"Always, *sladkaya*."

She smiles, but I can see the fear in her eyes. I kiss her forehead, right between her eyes where she's furrowing it in worry.

"Relax, baby. This is the fun part," I say, giving her a wink as I back up to grab a handful of sweet teas from the fridge before heading to the elevator. I step in and give her another smile. "I love you," I tell her one last time, smiling like an idiot when she blows me a kiss and says it back.

I'm still grinning when I get back in the SUV and toss them their teas.

"Seriously?" Vitaly asks as soon as my door shuts. "You just blurted out I love you like that?"

"The fuck?" I look back at him. He's giving me a huge grin and holding up his cell phone.

"My sister-in-law and I keep no secrets, Danil. Also, this is a group chat, so Roman and Matvey know as well."

"Why the fuck am I not surprised?" I laugh and shake my head. "It just came out. I wasn't thinking, but she said it back, so I guess I didn't fuck it up too much."

Vitaly lets out another laugh as he turns onto the expressway that will lead us out of the city and says, "I had no idea you were into breath play, but I guess it's not a complete surprise. You always did like to be in control, even when we were kids. I think you're the only person I've never seen drunk."

"And you never will."

He laughs because I've just proven his point, but I can't help it. I hate the feeling of not being in control of my own body. I drink enough to take the edge off, but once I feel like it's taking over, I stop.

"So about the breath play," Vitaly says, making Lev laugh from the backseat. The doctor is letting out muffled whimpers, but no one's paying him any attention. If he was smart, he'd enjoy these last few pain-free moments, because they're the last he's ever going to have in this life. If he wants to piss them away whining like a little bitch, then I'm not going to stop him. To each his own and all that.

"Let it go," I tell him. "You're not getting any details."

"You can't fault me for trying," he says with a shrug. "It was very convincing when you two walked back into the room. Simona's very obvious hand necklace print around her neck and the way she knelt at your feet. If I didn't know you any better, I would've thought you'd strangled the fight right out of her."

"Glad to know it worked," I tell him, opening up my own tea and taking a drink.

"I had no idea Simona was into the rough stuff," he says, because Vitaly never knows when to quit.

"He's gonna kick your ass," Lev says, smacking Vitaly's shoulder with a laugh. "Don't forget I'm the one who taught him how to fight."

"Remember the time that one little fucker taunted Danil because he thought he was just a computer dork?"

"Yeah, I do," Lev says, laughing. "He put the little shit in the hospital. That was a proud day for me."

I laugh at the memory. I'd been seventeen, and the guy had been picking on me for weeks. Lev had been doubling down on our lessons ever since the night my stepdad beat me into unconsciousness and I'd sworn it would never happen again. When that guy had started teasing me, I'd snapped, and it was the last goddamn time anyone tried to mess with me at school. It was the first time I put someone in the hospital, but certainly not the last.

We joke around for a few more minutes, but the closer we get to the warehouse, the antsier we get. We're all desperate for answers. We've waited over a year for them, and we've finally gotten our hands on someone who's involved in the inner workings of this trafficking ring. We want answers, and we're damn well going to get them, and in the process I'm

going to get revenge for what he did to Simona. It’s going to be a damn good night.

By the time Vitaly parks next to Matvey’s Camaro, I’m tapping out an agitated rhythm with my foot and running my fingers over the pruning shears as I imagine how good it’s going to feel when I cut off every finger he dared to slip inside my woman.

No one touches that sweet, perfect pussy but me.

Matvey and Roman are already out and waiting with Timofey beside them. As soon as I’m near Matvey, I give him a big smile, and he actually returns it. It’s not as big as mine, but it’s the biggest damn smile I’ve seen him give since before Alina went missing. I want to kill this fucking doctor, but I’m not about to deny Matvey the pleasure of joining in.

“Ready to have some fun?” I ask him.

His dark eyes lock on the man that Lev’s hauling from the back. “Fuck yeah I am.”

The doctor’s eyes dart between us, and I’m guessing it’s not going to be long at all before he loses control of his bladder. Lev and Vitaly each grab an arm, leading him into the deserted warehouse. We take him to the room we set up months ago. The windows are boarded up, several lanterns are placed around the room since there’s no electricity, and there’s even a chair with restraints. It’s fitting that he’ll be in the same kind of vulnerable position that he put Simona in.

“Ask him what his name is,” I tell Timofey.

He steps closer and starts speaking to the man in Romanian. I rip the tape from his mouth seconds before a shaky string of frantic Romanian rushes out of him. After he’s said everything he wants to say, I wait for Timofey to translate.

“He says his name is Stefan, and he’s a doctor. He claims to have no idea what’s going on, and he’s trying to convince me he’s completely innocent and begging me to help free him.”

“We know who you are,” I tell him, “and you’re going to fucking die tonight. It’s your choice how quickly that happens.” I pause so Timofey can translate before continuing. “We want to know the name of the Bratva that’s in charge of all this. Give us what we want, and your death will be quicker.”

It’s a lie. We’ll be killing him slowly no matter what the fuck he says, but men will often tell you every damn detail you want in the hopes of sparing themselves hours of torture. Everyone likes to think they're tough,

but most will cave in the end, some a lot quicker than others, and, no surprise to anyone, Stefan is one of those men.

He immediately starts blubbering god knows what in Romanian, desperately pleading with Timofey and spilling all his dirty secrets. God, I haven't even shown him the pruning shears yet.

"Well, that was fast," Timofey says, switching back to Russian. "He said he doesn't know the name of the Bratva. Women are brought here, and a Romanian man named Emil is always with them. Stefan here is in charge of examining them. He says he looks after them and makes sure they're okay, says he takes care of them as best he can."

I bark out a harsh laugh. "Simona told me what he does. Emil holds them down while this sick, old fuck fingers them and then jerks off on them. It's part of his fucking payment."

"He does this to all the women who come through?" Matvey asks.

"It sounded like it, yeah," I tell him.

He pulls out his phone and finds a photo of Alina. Holding it out to Stefan, he asks, "Do you recognize her?"

When he hesitates, I pull out the pruning shears, laughing when his bladder finally lets go and the front of his pants turn dark.

"The woman you saw me with tonight," I tell him, "I know what you did to her, you sick fuck."

Walking closer, I stand on his left side. He'd been holding his drink in his right hand tonight, and I'm guessing that's his dominant one, probably the one he would use to jerk off with, which means his left hand, these fucking fingers right in front of me, were the ones he used to slide into Simona.

"I'm taking every goddamn finger you touched her with," I tell him while Timofey translates. "While I do that, I want you to think long and hard about whether or not you've seen the woman in that photo."

I grab his index finger while he struggles uselessly against his restraints. He starts screaming before I've even put it between the shears' sharp blades. These are brand new and sharp as fuck. I know this because Roman's always telling Emily to be careful when she uses them, worried she's going to cut herself. I'm guessing he'll be buying her a new pair after tonight.

I give another soft laugh and turn to my brothers. "This is going to hurt like a motherfucker," I say, before tightening my grip and slicing through

his flesh. His screams fill the room when I hit bone, but I keep going, slicing clean through until his finger falls to the floor, his blood already forming a puddle. Lev sees it and goes to grab the blowtorch. We'll have to cauterize his hand if we want him to last the night. Can't have him dying on us just yet.

"Was that the finger you used?" I ask him. I put the shears around his middle finger. "Or was it this one?"

He's mumbling in Romanian, spit and snot dripping down his chin, but I don't wait for Timofey to translate. I take his next finger, and then I take the rest, slowly making my way around his hand until only the thumb is left. When I start cutting through that one, he passes out, so I wait.

"Not so fast," Vitaly says, smacking his cheeks to revive him. When that doesn't work, he pours a bottle of water on his face, and as soon as Stefan opens his eyes, I finish cutting off his thumb.

Stepping back, I give Lev room, and as soon as the blowtorch comes on, Stefan uses the last of his strength to scream bloody murder as the flames burn his open wounds, sealing them enough to stop the bleeding. The stench of burnt flesh fills the room, and I see Matvey wince at the smell before holding Alina's picture up again. It's hard to look at her smiling face. She was so fucking happy and so wonderfully unaware of how cruel and perverse people can be, and then sick fucks like Stefan came along and destroyed everything without even a speck of remorse.

"Do you recognize her?" he asks again.

When he says something in Romanian, Timofey says, "I see so many girls. They all look the same to me."

Without a word, he holds out his hand to me, and I pass him the shears. For the first time since all this started, Matvey has someone to take his aggression out on, and I fucking love that for him. He takes his time, taking the fingers in pieces. We have to revive Stefan twice before Lev steps in with the blowtorch. When Roman starts taking off Stefan's fancy dress shoes and socks and his bare toes are on full display, he finally starts telling us what we want to hear.

After several minutes of him gasping and sputtering in Romanian, Timofey says, "She looks familiar, but I can't be for sure. If it's the same girl I'm thinking of, then it was over a year ago."

The room goes deathly quiet except for Stefan's whiny, panting moans. Roman steps closer and says, "That's my sister," and Stefan goes a bit paler

when he realizes what's going on here. This isn't about money. It's personal, which means there's no way in fuck he can talk or buy his way out of this. "What the fuck happened to her?"

"I don't know," Timofey translates. "I never saw her again. She was brought in, and I examined her."

Matvey lets out a pained, low growl at that because we all know what his examination methods consist of.

Stefan keeps talking as Timofey quickly translates. "She was a virgin," he says, trying to appease our anger. "That means she would've been sold for a high bid instead of going to a club and being passed around."

"Who fucking bought her?" Matvey growls. "Who's behind all this?"

"I don't know," Timofey translates. "Someone very powerful. Emil's in charge of bringing in girls from Romania. We have other men in other countries doing the same thing."

"How the fuck do you get paid?" I ask him.

"Money gets transferred to me through a company called Swan Investments."

"Where was Simona taken to once she was brought to America? What's the address?"

He gives the address of a place that's about twenty minutes from the Red Viper, and then quickly adds, "But there won't be another shipment for a few months."

"She said she met the man in charge of all this. Why haven't you met him?"

"I'm no one," Timofey translates, and I don't disagree. "They only meet with Emil and his top men, and they insist on seeing each batch of new women, but they're never in one place for long, and sometimes they view them in the country they were taken from instead of flying into America. It's always changing. They're very careful about not getting caught." He lets out another slobbering gasp. "They're untouchable."

"We'll fucking see about that," Roman says, grabbing the shears and getting to work on Stefan's left foot.

The old man's a fighter, I'll give him that. I seriously thought he'd stroke out, and I know he's wishing he would, but he lasts for hours, and we don't waste a second of it. All five of us take our anger, our rage, all the shit we've been feeling since Alina disappeared, and we give it all to Stefan. By the time his heart stops, there's very little left of him. The room is filled

with the stench of blood and burning flesh and piss and shit and vomit because he lost control of everything near the end.

We're covered in blood, staring down at the body we've quite literally destroyed, and I don't feel a single drop of remorse. My only regret is that we couldn't make it last longer. He'd talked, though. Stefan had remembered details that I think surprised even him. He'd told us that the head of the Bratva has a brother who helps with everything. Everyone's afraid of the two men, and Emil let slip once that they're originally from Saint Petersburg and do a lot of business in Berlin. They also have Red Viper clubs all over the world, each being operated the same way, each being supplied directly by the Bratva.

It's not a complete picture, but it's pieces to the damn puzzle, and I'm going to make them all fit together. It's the first real lead we've had, and we're all feeling the excitement.

"Jesus Christ."

I turn to see a couple of our enforcers that Timofey called to come and dispose of the body. They walk in, eyeing what's left of Stefan. These men are used to violence, but this is testing their limits. Lucky for them they get themselves under control and let out a laugh instead of throwing up in the corner like they most definitely want to. My brothers and I aren't cruel, but we don't tolerate weakness in our Bratva. You can do the job, or you can't. There's no in between, and if you can't do the job, then we have no use for you. The death will always be a quick one, though. Like I said, we aren't cruel.

"Get rid of the body," Roman tells them, tossing the bloody pruning shears into the gaping hole that used to be Stefan's stomach. They land in a pile of intestines, sinking into the gooey flesh with a sound that would test even the hardened of men.

"I really hope I can replace those before Emily realizes they're missing. I'd really rather she not know about this."

Vitaly looks over at Roman and laughs. "You think maybe the five of us walking in covered head to toe in blood might clue her in on what happened tonight?"

"It's three in the morning, and Sergei texted me an hour ago to let me know that she'd fallen asleep. I can sneak in and get a shower before she wakes. She knows enough about all this. She doesn't need to know the details."

“Agreed,” I say, knowing there’s no way in hell I’d want Simona to know that we slowly gutted an old man and then pissed in his open wound while we laughed and he took his last breaths. She’ll know he’s dead and that he suffered horribly. She has enough nightmares as it is. It’s best she doesn’t know how truly monstrous I can be. This is the side of me that she’ll never see, the side that I don’t ever want her to see. It will never be directed at her, only at those who dare to hurt her, but that doesn’t mean she’d be happy knowing this sort of darkness lives inside me and that I’m capable of such violence.

Taking one last look at Stefan, I turn my back on him and walk outside. We’re all still riding the high, and on the drive back all I can think about is how badly I miss Simona and want to get back to her. She’d texted me a few times, asking how everything was going, but my responses had been quick and far apart. Her last text had come in two hours ago, telling me that she loves me and to be careful. Then she’d sent me the kissing face emoji, which is just cute as fuck.

After spending several minutes convincing Vitaly that we’re way too bloody to go through a drive-thru, we finally pull into the parking garage and load into the elevator. All five of us look like we just finished an all-night shoot for a horror movie, but there’s a lightness that wasn’t there before. Torturing a guy will do that to you.

As soon as the doors open, Sergei and Aleksandr are waiting for us. They’re at the counter drinking coffee and watching the security monitors.

“Goddamn,” Aleksandr mutters when he sees all the dried blood. “Looks like you all had fun tonight.”

Vitaly laughs and claps him on the back before going to raid the fridge. “You have no idea, Aleks. It was a good fucking night.”

“How’d they do?” I ask them.

Sergei puts his empty mug in the dishwasher and says, “They’re doing fine. They were worried, a bit antsy, but they both ate supper and finally crashed around two.”

“We watched the monitors all night,” Aleksandr adds. “Nothing unusual or suspicious.”

“Good work,” I tell them, checking the security footage for myself because there’s no way I can’t double-check it.

Lev leads them back to the elevator while the rest of us wait around the kitchen island. When he gets back, I tell them, “The footage looks good.

I’m going to go through Tom’s computer and see if I can find anything, and I’ll start digging around to see who owns the property that Stefan mentioned and look into the names he gave.”

“After I get cleaned up, I’m going to drive over there and watch it for a few hours,” Matvey says. “See if anyone shows up.”

“I’ll come with you,” Lev says.

“I will, too, if we can stop and grab some breakfast,” Vitaly says. “I’m too revved up to sleep right now.”

We all go off in our separate directions to get cleaned up. Matvey follows me down the stairs, and before I turn to go to my room, he says, “Thanks for calling me. I know he should’ve been all yours after what he did to Simona, but I appreciate you letting me have a piece of him.”

“He hurt Alina too, brother. There was no way in hell I was going to keep you out of this. We all needed this kill, and we needed to do it together.”

He gives me a rare shoulder squeeze before nodding and walking down the hall that leads to his room. I watch him, noticing that he’s holding his head a little higher than usual. Stefan’s blood has invigorated us, reminded us how fucking close we are, and it’s made us more determined than ever.

Being careful to not make any noise, I slip into my room. She’s left the curtains open, and the sky is already light enough to give me a clear view of Simona. She’s curled up on her side, hugging my pillow with her dark hair splayed out around her. The sheet is bunched up at her feet, revealing a long, toned leg that I’d very much like to kiss from toes to ass.

I’m hard as a rock and desperate to touch her, but I won’t, not with that fucker’s blood all over me. She’s too good for that. I won’t taint her perfect, innocent body with his filth. I step into the bathroom and quickly get in the shower. The urge to jerk off is fucking strong, and I almost give in, but Simona said she didn’t want me to, so I don’t. She feels the same way I do. I’d hate it if she touched herself in the shower without me. I want to take care of her needs, just like she wants to take care of mine, and with that thought firmly in place, I finish scrubbing off the dried blood and step out of the shower.

Without even bothering to dry off, I walk into the bedroom, soaking wet and butt-ass naked, and stand at the end of the bed. Simona’s rolled onto her back, and I don’t waste any time. Getting on the bed, I grip her thighs in my

hands, groaning at the feel of her soft flesh and bury my head between her legs.

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Chapter 10

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Simona

I wake with a start. Disoriented, I reach out for Danil, but then I hear his deep, manly groan coming from between my legs right before the wet heat of his tongue runs up my slit.

"Danil," I moan, reaching down to touch him. His hair is dripping wet and so are the broad shoulders that I dig my nails into as he slides his tongue into me. He lets out another feral-sounding growl before he fucking devours my pussy. His fingers dig into my thighs, spreading me wider as his tongue goes deeper. I throw my head back, rocking my hips while he feasts on every part of me. He licks and sucks and nips at my skin until my whole body is shaking, and when he kisses his way to my clit and wraps his lips around me, I moan his name and come so hard my vision darkens.

He doesn't let up. He sucks and tongues my clit, not even letting up when I become too sensitive. His name leaves my lips in fast, breathy whimpers, but still he doesn't let up. He's in full control, just like he was in Tom's office, and I fucking love it. Sliding two fingers into me, he fingers me slowly while rimming my bundle of nerves with his tongue, and when I start to come again, I fist his hair and rock my hips, wanting him as close as I can get him.

By the time my body starts to come down, I'm panting and shaking and the only thought in my head is about getting him inside me. He's lazily licking and sucking my pussy clean, savoring the taste and feel of me, and when I start to tug on his shoulders, he lets out a soft laugh. The heat of his breath hits my sensitive folds, sending another spark of pleasure through my spent body, and when I tug on him again, he lifts his head, watching me as he places a line of kisses around my clit.

“Please, Danil,” I beg, brushing aside a few strands of damp hair.

His grey eyes study me as he keeps kissing my sensitive skin. After several more kisses, he says, “You said you wanted to take it slow.”

“I changed my mind. I don’t want to wait any longer. If I’ve learned anything from all this, it’s that life is full of danger and no one is guaranteed a tomorrow. I don’t want to spend another day not knowing what it’s like to have you inside me. I want this. I want *you*. And I would never forgive myself if something happened to you and…” my voice starts to shake because the very idea of something happening to him is enough to destroy me.

“Baby,” he whispers, scooting up so his body is flush with mine, our faces only inches apart. “I’m not going anywhere, *sladkaya*, and nothing is going to happen to me. We can wait as long as you need.” He gives me a soft kiss. “There’s no pressure, no rush.”

I smile and wrap my legs around him, pulling him even closer so I can feel the hard length of him against my pussy. He grits his teeth and lets out a soft groan before I fist the back of his hair and whisper, “I don’t want to wait. I want you to fuck me.”

His body is tense, and I know he’s using every last ounce of willpower he has, but he still takes the time to cup my face and look into my eyes. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes,” I say without a moment’s hesitation. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

“Fuck, baby,” he groans, brushing his lips over mine before slowly giving me a soft bite and then running his tongue over the stinging flesh. He kisses a line down my jaw, and when I tilt my chin up to give him better access, he groans at the sight of my exposed skin. Before going to bed, I’d looked in the mirror and seen the way the red marks were quickly turning to dark purple. I’m guessing they look even worse now. His lips are feather soft as he kisses the path of bruises. “I’m sorry,” he whispers against my skin after each kiss.

“For what?” I ask, threading my fingers through his hair. “For fingering me and giving me the best orgasm of my entire life? For letting me give you a blowjob? Or for wrapping your hands around me just like I wanted and asked you to do?” I cup his face and force him to look at me. “I wanted everything we did. I fucking loved it, Danil. I loved giving you control and knowing that you would take care of me, that you wouldn’t hurt me beyond

what I wanted or could handle. You have no idea how much that turned me on, so please don't apologize for it."

He slowly runs his finger over my neck. "Okay, *sladkaya*, no more apologies. I'm not going to lie and pretend I didn't like doing it. It was fucking amazing," he says with a soft laugh. "And I'm not going to lie and say I don't like knowing I've marked your skin, that you're going to wear this for days, and every time you look in the mirror, you're going to remember how you got them."

Giving my neck another kiss, he brings his face back to mine, "But I need you to promise me that you'll never do anything with me that you don't want to do. I enjoyed this because I knew you did too. I would've hated it if you'd hated it. I'll never forgive myself if I go too far with you."

"I'll tell you if I don't like something. I promise." I slide my hand between us and run my fingers along the length of him. "I have a feeling I'm really going to like this."

He smiles and runs his fingers along my cheek. "If you want me to wear a condom, I will. I've never not worn one, and I'd fucking give anything to feel your bare pussy wrapped around me, but I'll wear one if that's what you want."

I run my nails down his back, savoring the feel of all that hard muscle. "I don't want anything between us."

He groans and positions the head of his cock at my slit. His thick head presses gently against me, and he feels impossibly big, like *there's no way in hell he's going to fit inside me* big, and when my body instinctively tenses to try to protect itself from the big cock at the door, Danil kisses me gently and whispers, "Just breathe, baby."

Running his hand down my side, he grips the T-shirt I'm wearing and slips it over my head. Most of the water has already dried on his body, but a few drops still drip down his neck to fall on my chest. When he sees it, he leans closer and runs his tongue over me, licking the water droplets from the curve of my breast before kissing his way to my nipple. I let out a deep groan when he wraps his mouth around me and sucks me in. He palms my other breast, pinching my nipple while his teeth graze my delicate flesh, taunting me with the possibility of pain, and just when I think I can't last a second longer, he gives me a soft bite and rubs the head of his cock against my clit.

“Fucking hell,” I moan, feeling how close the orgasm already is. He tongues my sore nipple, flicking and sucking it while he slides over my swollen, wet clit. “Danil,” I whimper right before I buck up against him and he tips me over the edge. My nails dig into his back as pleasure consumes every damn part of me.

“I’ve got you, baby,” he murmurs against my chest. “I’ve always got you.”

Before I’ve fully come down, he positions his head against my slit and slowly starts to slide in. My body’s still riding the high, but I still clench up as soon as he starts to part my pussy lips. He gives my nipple one last suck before kissing his way back to my mouth.

“*Sladkaya*,” he whispers, looking down at me. His eyes are filled with love and lust, but beneath all that is something much darker. Danil would never hurt me, I know this, but he’s a violent man, and that violence is never too far from the surface. I know he wants to fuck me hard, wants to pull the screams from my throat as he tears into me, wants to see the pleasure and pain written all over my face, but he’s holding that part of himself back. For now, anyway. I know he won’t always go easy on me, but for my first time, he is, and I love him so fucking much for it, because even going slow, this is going to hurt like a son of a bitch.

“I need you to trust me with your body again, baby.”

“I do,” I quickly whisper, clutching him even tighter against me.

“Just like you did when you took my cock down your throat like such a fucking good girl.”

His words send a thrill through me, making my breath catch in my throat.

“Just like you did when you let me steal your breath while I fingered your tight pussy.”

“Mm-hmm,” I moan, feeling him start to slide into me.

“You gonna take me like a good girl, *sladkaya?*” he murmurs against my lips while he cups my face, surrounding me with his presence.

“Yes,” I whimper, feeling the sharp sting as the head of his cock pushes past my body’s natural resistance.

“Mine, sweetheart,” he growls against my lips as he feeds me another inch, spreading me wider than my body wants to go. The pain has tears coming to my eyes, and when they spill over, he drags his tongue up my

cheek, licking them away. “How the fuck does every part of you taste so goddamn good?”

I smile against his cheek even as he thrusts in another inch, pulling a pained moan from me that’s quickly muffled by his hungry mouth. He kisses me hard, forcing my mind away from the pain and back onto him and how fucking amazing he feels. His tongue runs over mine as he threads his fingers in my hair, holding me still as he devours my mouth and swallows my screams when he thrusts his hips and buries himself inside me as deep as he can get.

“Fuck!” I whimper against his lips, feeling like I’m being split in two. He doesn’t move, just keeps still, giving my body the chance to get used to him as he kisses me so fucking sweetly.

“I love you so fucking much,” he whispers against my lips. His fingers brush back my hair as he looks down at me. When I turn my head and catch one of his fingers with my teeth, he arches a brow and gives me a sexy smirk. I give him a hard enough bite to really get his attention, and then I rock my hips, even though the movement hurts like hell when it causes his enormous dick to move just enough to light all my nerve endings up with pain. He arches a brow at me.

“It’s going to hurt anyway,” I reason. “Might as well have fun with it.”

He laughs and kisses me again. “We’re definitely going to have fun with it, baby.”

I’m about to question my bravery when he grabs one of my legs and hikes it up, gripping the back of my thigh and holding me in place as he slowly slides in deeper.

“Holy shit,” I whisper shout. “I didn’t think you could go any deeper,” I say, fully aware that he’s just opened up a whole new world for me, one I never want to leave.

He smiles at the look of awe on my face, and then he slowly starts to fuck me, showing me just how damn good this can feel.

“You feel just as good as I knew you would,” he groans, speeding up and getting into a faster rhythm that has my eyes nearly rolling back in my head. It’s still painful, and I’m guessing that with his size it’s going to be for the first few times, but underneath that is a pleasure I’ve been completely ignorant of. I feel impossibly full, and each stroke of his cock is hitting some sensitive part inside of me that’s making my toes curl and my breathing turn ragged.

“You like that, baby?” he asks with a grin, circling his hips and thrusting in even deeper as he hits that same spot over and over again. I can’t form words, so I just nod my head and dig my nails into his back.

“So fucking tight,” he growls against my lips, and when he lifts up enough to see where we’re joined, his eyes go fucking feral at the sight of my pussy gripping his cock. He switches to Russian, the words fast and beautiful and quickly pushing me to the point of no return.

“Danil,” I whimper, knowing I’m close.

His eyes meet mine before he cups the back of my head and lifts me up enough so I can watch him fuck me.

“Do you see how beautiful you are, *sladkaya*? Look at your sweet pussy taking my cock. It’s the sexiest goddamn thing I’ve ever seen.”

He’s right. The sight of my bare pussy wrapped tightly around his thick shaft as he slides in and out of me is mesmerizing. I can’t take my eyes off of us. He’s slick with our joined arousal, and not even the slight glimpse of blood is enough to stop the orgasm that’s threatening to completely undo me.

“I feel how fucking wet you are, baby, and I feel how tense you’re getting. Is my sweet girl about to come all over me?”

“Yes,” I whisper, keeping my eyes on where we’re joined. When he brings a hand between us, and presses the pad of his thumb against my swollen, achy clit, rubbing me in slow, firm circles while he fucks me harder, I let go with a scream.

“Good fucking girl,” he growls when my pussy clenches around him, and if it wasn’t for the tight grip he has on the back of my head, I’d be collapsing back onto the pillow. With the last of my strength, I cup his face and pull him closer for a kiss. My body is on fire with pleasure. I’ve only ever had orgasms by stimulating my clit, but having him inside me at the same time is unlike anything I ever thought possible. The force of the pleasure makes everything else disappear. My whole world narrows down to him and the way he’s making my body feel, and I’m so overcome by the moment that tears start to fall again.

He feels the wetness on his cheeks and gently lowers my head back to the pillow, but he never stops kissing me. He fucks me harder, making my tits bounce with each thrust, dragging my nipples over his tattooed, muscled chest until I feel the pressure start to build again.

“I’m so fucking close,” he warns, pulling back so he can look at me. “If you want me to pull out, I need you to tell me now, baby.”

“Don’t you dare.” His eyes turn darker when I bring my other knee up, allowing him to go even deeper. “I want to feel you come inside me. I want all of you, Danil, every fucking drop.”

“Goddamn,” he groans before kissing me and fucking me so hard I swear I see stars. Each thrust pushes me closer to the edge, and when he growls my name, I let go with him. We come together, each of us consumed by the other, and every pulse of his cock sends another rush of pleasure through me. I’ve never felt so close to another person before, like we’ve truly become one in this moment, and I never want it to end.

As soon as I start to come down and he gives one last thrust, I wrap my arms and legs around him, holding him as tightly to me as I can. “I don’t want to leave,” I whisper against his neck.

“Baby, what are you talking about?” He wraps an arm under me so he can hug me tighter. “What’s wrong, *sladkaya*?”

“Right after you bought me, you said that you wouldn’t keep me against my will, that you’d let me go when all this was over, but I don’t want to leave.”

More tears start to fall, and I don’t know if it’s hormones or the amazing sexual experience we just shared, but I’m overcome with terror that he’s going to decide to send me on my way once Alina is found, and I can’t fucking handle that.

“Simona, look at me, baby.”

He kisses my cheek, waiting for me to release the death grip I have on him, and when I finally let go enough for him to see me, he’s giving me the sweetest smile.

“I told you I love you, and I meant every word of it. I’ve never said that to anyone else. It’s not something I take lightly, and there’s no way in hell I could just sit back and watch you walk away when all this is over.”

He runs his thumb along my cheek, wiping away the tears that won’t fucking stop.

“I don’t think you have the slightest clue how much I love you.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you’re stuck with me,” I admit. “And I don’t want you to figure out you could do so much better and then toss me aside.”

He laughs and then kisses the angry smirk I give him right off my face.

“I don’t feel stuck with you. I feel lucky to have found you, so fucking lucky, baby, and I would never toss you aside, and there’s no such thing as someone better than you. I’m the one who’s unworthy of you, and I’m fully aware of that.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I tell him.

He drags his nose along my cheek, breathing in my scent. “If you knew all the things I’ve done, *sladkaya*, you wouldn’t be so quick to disagree.”

His words sends a shiver down my spine, but it’s not from fear. I know what he’s capable of, and I know what he did tonight, and it shouldn’t turn me on, but it most definitely does. When my pussy clenches around his still semi-hard cock, he lets out a soft laugh.

“I’m glad you like that side of me, because it’s not going to go away. That doesn’t mean I want you knowing details, though.”

“You killed him tonight, didn’t you?” I whisper, running my fingers along the stubble that’s grown back.

“He’s dead, and he suffered for what he did to you,” is all he says.

“Did you find out anything about Alina?”

He kisses my cheek and runs a finger along my collarbone. “We learned some new things, and we’re going to look into it. He recognized Alina’s face, though, so that’s very good news. The organization that’s responsible for your kidnapping is the same one that took her. We suspected they were the same, but we weren’t sure.”

Before I can ask more questions, he slowly pulls out of me, furrowing his brows when he sees me wince. With a touch that’s so gentle it makes me forget the violence that hides inside this man, he parts my thighs and looks at my pussy, making sure I’m okay.

“So beautiful,” he whispers, and then surprises the hell out of me by leaning down and kissing every inch of my sore pussy before running his tongue up my slit.

When he sees the shocked look I’m giving him, he smiles and gives me another lick. “You think I wouldn’t want to taste you because I just came inside you?”

“Kind of,” I admit, because I just assumed he wouldn’t want to taste himself.

“I love that you taste like me, *sladkaya*, and I love that I can taste your blood mixed with our cum. It’s a very vivid reminder that you're mine and only mine and that you will never be anyone else’s.”

My heart speeds up at his words. “Careful, Danil, that almost sounded like a proposal,” I joke, but he doesn’t laugh.

He just gives me a wink and kisses my clit. “I want my ring on your finger,” he says, slowly kissing his way up my body and along my lower stomach, “and I want my baby in your beautiful belly.”

My breath hitches at his words, and as insane as all this is, I can’t help but smile because the thought of being married to Danil and carrying his baby makes me feel downright giddy. I want to be claimed by him in every possible way, and I want everyone to know that he’s mine just as much as I’m his.

His lips make their way up my chest while he whispers against my skin, “You’re not running away screaming, so I’m taking that as a very good sign.”

I laugh and run my hands along his back, lightly dragging my nails along the tattoos that cover nearly every inch of him. “Why in the hell would I ever run from you?”

He laughs and gives my nipple a pinch that makes me squirm beneath him. “Because I think my sweet girl would love to get caught. Wouldn’t you, baby?” His breath is a whisper against my lips as he pinches my nipple hard enough to make me moan and arch up to him. “I think you’d love it if I chased you and then bent you over the bed, smacked your ass until it was beet red and then fucked you hard while I cut off your air.”

“Jesus Christ,” I moan, feeling my body respond to every word he’s just said.

The sexy smirk on his face has me letting out another laugh. There’s no use denying the effect he has on me. He can read my body so easily, and he knows exactly how turned on I am by everything he’s just said.

“Soon, *sladkaya*,” he promises. “And maybe when I’ve got you bent over and your ass is a beautiful shade of red, it won’t be your pussy I’ll be fucking.”

When he sees how wide my eyes get, a huge smile lights up his face before he kisses me again and then lifts himself off me.

“Stay here, baby.”

I watch him walk into the bathroom, admiring the ass that looks like it was carved from marble. God, how many squats do you have to do to get an ass like that? I keep staring, waiting for him to come back, and the view from the front is just as fucking delicious. My eyes run over the tattooed

pecs, the peaks and grooves of his abs, the thick, muscular thighs, the set of balls that would make any man beat his chest with pride, and the cock that's still semi-hard and swaying with each step he takes. He's the fucking definition of an alpha male, and I can't believe that I get to fuck this perfect man any goddamn time I want.

He's giving me a very amused grin like he can read every dirty thought in my head as he gets on the bed and gently presses a warm cloth between my legs. The heat instantly soothes my aching pussy, and I let out a sigh and scoot closer to him when he lays down beside me. Keeping the cloth pressed between my legs, he spoons me and pulls the blanket over us.

"You haven't gotten enough sleep, baby." He kisses my shoulder and keeps me wrapped in his arms. "Try to rest."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to hold you."

"Sounds exciting."

"You're damn right it is," he says, and there's not a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

My eyes are already getting heavy as my exhausted body starts to give up the fight. I hug his forearm, giving it a kiss before letting my eyes drift closed.

"Can I go with you to Vitaly's grand opening?"

"Of course."

"I don't want you going to strip clubs without me. I wish you didn't have to go to them at all," I admit.

"Me too, baby, and I promise I'll always take you with me if I can, and no other woman will ever touch me but you." He kisses my neck and rests his head by mine. "There's no one but you for me, *sladkaya*."

I smile and kiss his arm again before snuggling back into him. The warmth of the cloth is making the throbbing between my legs morph to a dull ache, and right before I fall asleep, he moves his hand so he can cup my left breast in a way that lets him feel the beat of my heart against his skin.

I'm not sure how long I sleep for, but as soon as I open my eyes and give a big stretch, Danil is kissing my cheek and picking me up, cradling me against his chest as he carries me to the bathroom.

"What are you doing?" I ask him with a laugh, and then I hear a loud thud from the next room. "What the hell was that?"

He smiles and kisses my forehead before setting me on the counter. I grab my toothbrush while he starts a bath. He's in nothing but a pair of jeans, and the man looks fucking delicious.

"Don't worry about the noise, *sladkaya*." He turns back to give me a wink. "You'll find out soon enough."

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to figure out what's going on as I finish brushing my teeth. He grins and walks over to me, and when I set my toothbrush aside, he cups my face and kisses me. My hands go to his waist, gripping the hard muscle as I wrap my legs around him and open my mouth for more. He groans and threads his fingers through my hair, fisting it hard enough to tilt my head up so he has better access. My pussy throbs from last night, but I can still feel myself growing wet.

"How sore are you?" he asks, kissing his way to my ear.

"I'm okay," I quickly say, because I don't want him to stop.

He laughs and gives my earlobe a soft bite. "Liar," he whispers.

"I'm a little sore," I admit.

He pulls back and looks into my eyes. "Tell me the truth, baby. How bad is it?"

"It feels like a giant dick fucked me good and hard a few hours ago," I say, giving him the complete truth. When I see the smug grin he can't hide, I add, "You don't have to look so damn proud of it."

He laughs again and strips out of his jeans before carrying me to the giant tub. Stepping in, he keeps me held close to his chest as he lowers down until I'm sitting in his lap and the hot water surrounds us. I rest my head on his shoulder and sigh.

"Damn, this feels good."

"I should've done it last night, but I knew how tired you were."

"Did you get any sleep?"

"A little."

It's my turn to nip his earlobe and say, "Liar."

He gives my ass cheek a hard squeeze that has me panting out a breath against his wet neck when he softens his grip and dances his fingers along my slippery skin.

"I got enough, baby. I couldn't make my brain shut off, so I gave up and grabbed my laptop. I wanted to see what was on Tom's computer, but I didn't want to leave your side, so I compromised."

"Find anything?"

“Nothing I ever want to see again,” he says, and I can hear so much in those words—the anger and pain and fatigue at having to constantly expose yourself to something you despise. It’s taking a toll on him, and I hate it. Turning my body, I wrap my arms around him in a big hug while I cup the back of his head. At first his body tenses in surprise, but then he hugs me back, completely enveloping me in his strong arms.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I wish I could do it for you.”

“I would never let you, baby. You’ve seen enough, and I’m going to do everything I can to make sure you don’t have to see any more.”

He kisses my ear and then positions me so I’m sitting in front of him as he grabs the detachable water nozzle. Putting my feet on the bottom of the bathtub, I hug my legs and tilt my head back so he can wet my hair.

“You don’t have to do this,” I tell him.

“I want to do this, *sladkaya*. I love taking care of you, so please don’t deny me the pleasure.”

I smile and close my eyes, moaning in pure bliss as he massages my scalp and washes my hair. The gentle way he touches me always surprises me. If I wasn’t experiencing it firsthand, I would never believe that someone like Danil was even capable of such gentle touches, but he continues to surprise me. After he’s done with my hair, he washes my body and then grabs my ankle, propping it up on his shoulder as he reaches for a razor and a can of shave gel.

“I changed my mind about watching you shave. I want to be the one to do it.”

He drains the water enough to expose the rest of my leg and lathers me up. I’ve never had anyone shave my legs before, and it doesn’t take long before I’m a fan. He’s careful with the blade, making sure to not nick me, and when one leg is silky smooth, he grabs the other and starts the process again.

I watch his face, smiling at the fierce concentration in his grey eyes, and when he catches me staring, the corner of his mouth lifts up and he gives me a wink. God, I love this man. When the second leg is done, he washes me clean and then laughs when I grab the razor and shave gel and quickly shave my armpits. When I’m rinsed clean and smooth, he drains out the dirty water before motioning for me to sit on the edge of the tub. It’s a large garden tub, plenty of room for me to sit, but when I hesitate, he lifts a brow at me.

“Sit down, *sladkaya*, and spread your legs.”

I do as he says, knowing I’m still smooth from the waxing I was given and that shaving isn’t what he has in mind. My heart speeds up when I spread my thighs and expose myself to him. He’s naked and fully hard and looking at me like a starving man. He grips my knees, spreading my legs even wider before slowly sliding his hands up my wet thighs. His fingers dig into my skin, trailing closer to my center. Grey eyes run over every inch of my body, and the look of pure, raw hunger pulls a moan from deep within me. All it takes is one look from him, one goddamn look, and I’m putty in his hands.

He grips my hips and then circles around to cup my ass, pushing me closer to the edge of the tub. When I keep my knees spread wide, he looks at my pussy and groans.

“You are a temptation unlike anything I’ve ever known.”

He kisses my inner thigh and then gives it a hard suck, keeping his grey eyes locked on mine as he marks my body again. When he pulls back, my skin is wet with his spit and the hickey is already blooming bright against my skin. He marks my other inner thigh and then slowly drags his tongue up my slit as I rest my hands behind me and rock up to him.

“I shouldn’t fuck you, baby,” he murmurs. “I know this perfect, tight pussy is sore, and I should leave you alone and let you rest, but I’m a selfish man when it comes to you.” He nips at one of my pussy lips, pulling another moan from me. “I want to bury myself inside you and make you scream.”

“Do it,” I beg, not giving the slightest fuck that I’m sore.

“Maybe,” he teases, gently parting my pussy with his tongue. “If you’re a good girl and come on my face first.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to respond, just grips my thighs, spreading me wide as he delves inside me. Bracing myself against the side of the tub, I watch this beautiful man eat my pussy like it’s the best fucking meal he’s ever had. I never knew I was into watching, but Danil has made me a fan. I’m a full-on self-voyeur and nothing gets me off faster than watching him do things to my body.

“Fuck,” I whimper when he starts to lick my clit while keeping his eyes on mine. He watches me watch him, knowing it’s driving me crazy to see the long, slow licks he’s giving me, and when he gives me a sharp flick, spanking my clit with his tongue, I moan his name and beg for more.

Wrapping his lips around me, he gives me a hard enough suck to push me over the edge. I come hard, rocking against him and moaning his name, never taking my eyes off where he's latched onto me. He keeps sucking, making my orgasm last an impossibly long time, and just when I'm convinced I'm going to pass out from pleasure overload, he pulls back and stands up.

"Hands and knees, baby, right fucking now."

I scurry up, positioning myself so my knees are right on the edge. The hard porcelain digs into me, but the pain feels good. It reminds me that I'll do anything to get him inside me, and when he grips my hips and presses his cock against my sore slit, I know I'd kneel on a pile of rocks for him. The pain is worth it. Everything is worth it if it gets me Danil.

"I went easy on you last night, *sladkaya*."

"I know," I whisper, barely recognizing the sound of my breathy, strained voice.

His fingers dig into my hips as he slowly presses into me. He fucks me with just the head of his cock, pulling whimpers and moans and mewling sounds that I didn't even know I was capable of making.

"Do you want me to go easy on you again?"

"No," I pant.

"Good," he growls, slamming into me in one hard thrust that pulls a scream from my lungs as my body tenses and my pussy grips him so hard it makes him growl my name and smack his hand against the tiled wall in front of me. Bringing his chest to my back, he surrounds me with his presence. His lips kiss my shoulder before he gives me a bite that sends another shudder of pleasure down my spine.

"My girl does like it rough," he murmurs against my skin as he gives me another hard thrust that makes my thighs shake even as I rock back to meet everything he's giving me.

His hand runs up my chest, cupping one bouncing breast as he gives my nipple a hard enough pinch to prove his point when it makes my whole body tremble with need. He fucks me hard, but the soreness quickly fades to the background. The pain is still there, but he's right. I do like it rough, and when he lets go of my breast so he can slide his hand up my neck, a whimper of pure raw need escapes as his fingers trail along my bruises.

"Goddamn," he growls, bringing his hand higher so he can cover my mouth and nose instead of pressing against my already sore flesh. "So

fucking perfect, baby," he whispers against my cheek as he pinches my nostrils shut and covers my mouth.

"Your tight little cunt is taking me so goddamn good."

His accent is thick, his voice raspy, and when he feels my body start to tense, he says, "Good fucking girl, baby. Come on my cock, *sladkaya*. Show me how much you like getting fucked hard while you can't breathe."

I move my hand on top of his, gripping it as my lungs scream for air and my body tips over the edge. As soon as he feels me tighten around his cock, he releases his hand, allowing me air as my vision darkens and my arms threaten to collapse. He hooks his arm around my chest, not allowing me to fall and hurt myself as he fucks me hard and I lose the ability to do anything except feel the pleasure and take what he's giving me.

With one more hard, deep thrust, he lets go and growls my name. I turn my head and he immediately brings his lips to mine, kissing me hard as he pulses inside me, filling me with everything he has. When he's completely spent, I feel him smile against my lips, and I can't help but laugh at the turn my life has taken.

"If someone had told me a week ago that I was going to be kidnapped and then sold to the sexiest man I've ever seen and then railed good and hard in a bathtub, I would've said they'd lost their damn minds."

He laughs and gives me another kiss before slowly sliding out of me. When I hiss out a breath, he turns the hot water back on.

"Okay, baby, more soaking, and I promise I'll behave myself."

"Well, that's no fun," I mutter, making him smile as he pulls me back into his lap. He holds me and gently strokes my back while I relax and completely melt against him.

"Will you tell me about your parents? I want to know everything about you."

"Prepare yourself for a boring story."

He kisses my forehead. "Nothing about you is boring. I want to know every detail, so start talking."

I dance my fingers along his shoulder, mindlessly playing a melody I've been working on while I tell him about my life. I tell him about my mom and dad, and even though the pain is still sharp, his presence dulls it, and I even smile and laugh when I tell him about the time my parents freaked out because I accidentally drank the spiked egg nog at their yearly Christmas party when I was twelve.

Danil laughs. “I see you’ve always been prone to getting your ass in trouble. I’ll have to remember that.”

“Oh please, I was such a rule follower it was pathetic.”

“There’s nothing pathetic about you. Did you have a lot of boyfriends? How many men do I need to visit?”

I can’t tell if he’s joking or not, but just in case he’s not, I don’t mention the few lousy dates I went on and say, “Zero,” and then give him the long, sad story of my matchmaking days and all the time I spent in all-girls schools.

“Where did you live? Where’s your apartment?”

“About six hours from here,” I tell him, but that’s all I say. We can figure out what to do about my apartment later. My rent is still paid up, and we’ve got enough shit to worry about. I don’t want him stressing about this too.

He surprises me by letting it go, and instead says, “I think your surprise is done, baby. You ready to see it?”

I sit up and meet his eyes. “What is it?”

He smiles and kisses me. “Wouldn’t be much of a surprise if I told you.”

We get out of the tub, and when he notices the slowness of my movements and the slight limp in my step, he quickly wraps a towel around me and carries me into the bedroom.

“I can walk,” I say with a laugh, even though I am seriously sore and kind of wishing I’d had a little more self-control this morning, but even as the thought hits me, I know it’s bullshit. I’ll never be able to resist Danil, and I won’t ever want to. A sore pussy is a price I’ll gladly pay.

Instead of setting me down, he carries me into the closet. “Okay, baby, what do you want to wear today?”

“Something comfy.” I point to a pair of yoga pants and a long-sleeve tee. He grabs them and then digs around until he’s holding a pair of panties and a matching bra. “Don’t forget the socks,” I tell him.

He smiles and grabs a pair of socks before carrying me back to the bathroom. When he sets me down and grabs my lotion, I start to laugh.

“I can get myself ready.”

“I know you can.” He squirts out a generous amount of lotion and kneels down. Grabbing one of my legs, he lifts it up and props my foot on his thigh as he starts to massage my legs while he rubs the lotion in. “This

isn’t about what you can or can’t do. This is about me wanting to take care of you, *sladkaya*.”

The look in his eyes has me closing my mouth. It’s not the look of someone who’s doing something just because they feel like they have to. The love and desire in his eyes makes it clear that he’s loving every goddamn second of this, and he’d be hurt if I told him to stop, so I don’t. I let this gorgeous man with nothing but a towel around his sculpted waist rub lotion all over my body until I feel like every cell is humming with need. His touch does something to me on a deep level. I noticed it the very first time he touched me, and it’s only gotten stronger since then.

When he opens my panties and arches a brow at me, I laugh and lift my foot. He’s clearly determined to see this thing through to the very end. He slides my panties up my body, sneaking a quick kiss to my pussy before he pulls them all the way up and starts on my bra. After he pulls my yoga pants on, I lift my arms for my shirt, and after it’s on, he kisses the crook of my neck and whispers, “So beautiful,” against my skin.

While he gets dressed, I run a brush through my hair and examine the bruises around my neck. They’re much darker today, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d think some dickhead had tried to strangle the life right out of me. It’s hard to wrap my brain around the fact that I’d wanted this, I’d fucking begged for it, but I had, and I know without a shadow of a doubt that I’ll do it again. I’m going to need to shop around for some cute scarves.

Danil comes back in with a huge smile on his face. “Ready, baby?”

I laugh at how cute his excitement is, and when I put my hand in his, he pulls me closer and says, “Close your eyes.”

I close them, letting him lead me out of the bedroom and to the room next door, the one I’d looked in that was mostly bare. I hear him close the door behind us, and the room immediately changes. It feels like it grows quieter, like the air around us is a little denser. Danil cups my face and kisses me gently.

“Open your eyes, baby,” he whispers against my lips before stepping back.

I open my eyes and my mouth drops open when I see the gorgeous piano in front of me. My hands come to my face as I turn to look at Danil. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he looks a little nervous. He’s watching me, studying my reaction, and before I can say anything, he says, “I can get you a different one if you’d prefer something else.”

I’m still too stunned to speak. He scrubs a hand over his face and then does something I never thought my tough Bratva boss would ever do. He starts rambling.

“I did a lot of research, and this is supposed to be the best, but I can get you anything you want, baby. Or would you rather not have one? I just thought you might want one, and I really want to know what all that music sounds like that you’re always playing on my arm.”

Before he can keep going, I throw myself into his arms and kiss him. I feel his body relax when he sees how obviously happy I am. He cups my ass with one hand and the other weaves its way into my hair.

“Thank you,” I whisper in between kisses. “I can’t believe you did this.” I cup his face and rest my forehead against his.

“I would do anything for you.”

I smile and look around the room, glancing between the gorgeous Fazioli grand piano and the much smaller door that leads into this room.

“How in the hell did this get in here?”

He laughs and points at the wall of windows. “A very big crane.”

“Holy shit,” I whisper. “That must’ve cost a damn fortune, and that’s on top of the cost of the piano. Danil, you didn’t have to do all this.”

“When will you learn that I’ll do anything for you?” He smiles and gives me another kiss. “Absolutely anything.” He sets me down and gives my ass a soft smack. “I also had the room soundproofed so you’d feel more comfortable playing.”

“I never told you about my stage fright,” I say, stepping closer and reaching out a shaky hand to touch the beautiful instrument.

“I know you, baby, and I know you wouldn’t want to play if you thought everyone in the house could hear you.”

He’s right. I wouldn’t have. I would’ve been too afraid that I’d be bothering everyone. My fingers run over the line of black and white keys.

“Will you play something for me, *sladkaya*?”

Nerves threaten to overwhelm me, but I take a breath and sit down, refusing to let them take over. This isn’t a concert hall. It’s just me playing a song for the man I love. I can do this. I can grant him this simple request.

At least I think I can. When I hover my fingers over the keys, I can’t bring myself to play anything. My body stiffens, my heart starts racing, and my mind goes horribly blank, like all the music has floated away. When I

finally look up to meet his eyes, mine are wet with tears, and all I can do is shake my head.

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Chapter 11

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Danil

"I'm so sorry," she whispers. Her blue eyes are glassy and threatening to overflow, and I feel like a giant ass for trying to force her to do something she isn't ready to do.

"Baby," I say, walking over to her and squatting down so we're eye to eye. "Don't cry." I brush a strand of hair off her cheek and tuck it behind her ear. "This is also why I soundproofed the room. I wanted you to have a safe place you could play, a place just for you and all to yourself."

"I'm sorry," she says again. "You went through all this trouble and spent so much money, and I'm just fucking it up."

I give a soft laugh. "I didn't go through any trouble. I wasn't out there working the crane or opening the wall of windows. I was in the bathroom fucking your sweet pussy. Remember?" I ask, giving her a wink.

She gives me a small smile, but I can tell she still feels guilty, and I hate it.

"And you certainly didn't fuck anything up, and I don't give a shit about the money." I cup the back of her head and kiss her. "All I care about is you."

"I really love it," she whispers, making me smile.

"I'm glad you do, baby." I can tell she's dying to play it, and as much as I want to hear her, I know she's not quite ready to let me in to this part of her life. I can be patient, though, so I give her another kiss and say, "Come find me when you're ready to eat."

She smiles and then gives me a kiss that pulls a groan from me and makes everything else disappear. Even though I was just inside her and came so hard it made me see stars, I'm still so fucking hungry for her. God,

she owns every goddamn part of me. I'm completely and utterly hers, forever, and instead of it scaring the hell out of me, I'm already making wedding plans in my head.

"I love you," she whispers against my lips, and hearing her say it has me grinning like a lovestruck teenager. I don't think I'll ever get used to it.

"I love you too, baby." I give her one last kiss before standing. "Don't forget to come get me when you're hungry."

She smiles and nods, and I can tell how antsy she's getting. I can see it in her face and the way she keeps fidgeting and glancing at the keys. I give her a wink and then leave the room, shutting the door behind me. It had cost a small fortune to get the piano up here and soundproof the entire room, but it had been worth every damn penny. We're going to get a lot of use out of that room, and the piano is only part of it.

Heading back to the bedroom, I get set up at my desk and start going through the rest of Tom's computer. I'd looked through most of it while Simona slept, but there's still a few things I need to check. The man has an insane amount of porn, but lucky for me, most of it was just regular shit from the internet so I hadn't had to comb through all of it. He is sharing videos with another man on the dark web, though, and I did have to look through all that. They seem to enjoy watching each other force their pets to do things, and I can't for the life of me figure out why.

I've long given up trying to understand the inner workings of these fuckers. They like to dominate and hurt and control, that's really all I need to know. It doesn't escape my notice that I also like to dominate and control and I do enjoy hurting Simona on occasion, but goddamn it, it's different. Everything I do with her and to her is guided by my love for her. If she was ever in real pain and terrified and hated what I was doing, my dick would go limp in a second. The very idea of forcing her to do something she didn't want to do makes me feel sick. So, yeah, I like to wrap my hand around her neck and control her air, and I'd love nothing more than to spank her ass red, but that's only because I know exactly how fucking wet it would make her and how much she'd love every goddamn second of it.

Putting my focus back on work, I spend the next several hours looking through everything and then researching what Stefan told us. I don't even realize how late it is until Simona walks in and grabs my hand, pulling me from the computer and making me come upstairs to eat. If she wasn't here,

I'd keep working, probably for the next day or two, but there's no way in hell she's going to allow that. I can tell by the worried look she's giving me.

"You've been working this whole time?"

"Yeah," I tell her, scrubbing a hand over my face and scratching at the stubble. "How do you like the piano?"

Her face lights up with her smile. "I love it so much. I've never played on anything so nice before. It's amazing."

I smile and kiss her. "I'm so glad you love it."

When Lev and Matvey walk in, Simona gives me a gentle push towards the nearest barstool. "I'll make some sandwiches. Just sit down and relax."

"I've been sitting," I tell her and start grabbing stuff from the fridge. She sighs at my stubbornness and smacks my ass when I'm bent over trying to find the mustard. I can't help but laugh, but then I say, "I'm the only one who gets to spank, baby."

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that," Lev says, making me laugh again even as I tell him to fuck off.

"Hey, what'd I miss?" Vitaly asks, walking in. "Who's getting spanked? Simona, have you been a bad girl again?"

I shoot him a look that makes him laugh and then hold up his hands. "Okay, okay, I'll stop."

Roman and Emily walk in right as Simona turns around, and as soon as Emily sees her bruised neck, Emily lets out a gasp and walks over.

"What the hell happened to you? They said that doctor guy didn't get to you last night."

"He didn't," Simona says, her eyes darting to me for help.

"We had to improvise a bit last night," I say, trying to make this as painless as possible for all of us.

"Improvise by strangling her?" Emily asks, raising a brow at me like I've lost my damn mind.

Vitaly and Lev laugh, making it clear that they're going to be no help whatsoever. I'm surprised Vitaly hasn't started making popcorn while they watch this show unfold.

Roman wraps an arm around Emily and pulls her close. He whispers something in her ear that makes her face turn a crimson red before she lets out a mortified groan.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?" she whisper shouts at him. "I look like a dumbass right now!"

He laughs and kisses her cheek. “You could never look like a dumbass, baby. You do look unbelievably cute and naive though.”

“Great,” she mutters, but she smiles and laughs when Roman kisses her again. He keeps one hand on her lower belly when she looks back over at us.

“Never mind,” she says, and we all start laughing. “Yeah, yeah, can we just forget all this happened?”

“Yes, please,” Simona says.

“Not a chance in hell,” Vitaly says. “This is what families do, and you’re both a part of this family, so prepare to be teased. We can’t make exceptions just because you’re women. That would be so unfair.”

“Agreed,” Lev says. “Everyone gets made fun of. It’s the rule.”

Matvey gives Simona a small smile when he sees the huge one she’s giving at being called a part of the family by one of my brothers. I kiss the top of her head and grab the cutting board and some tomatoes. Turns out everyone is hungry, so while I’m chopping I ask them if they found anything while watching the address Stefan gave us. We keep the conversation in Russian, but Emily and Simona don’t seem to mind.

“We saw a few men go in this morning,” Matvey says, “but they left a few minutes later. We didn’t spot any women and no cars came around. We put a few guys on it and told them to work in shifts so it’s being watched nonstop. They’re going to call if they see anything at all, and they’ll write down any license plate numbers.”

“The place is rundown,” Vitaly says, grabbing one of the sandwiches. “It looks like an old hotel that should’ve been torn down decades ago, the kind of place that any sane person would avoid.”

Lev gets everyone a drink. “They’re going to realize Stefan is missing if they haven’t already.”

Roman sits down next to Emily and says, “I’m guessing we’ll get more information in a couple of days when Pink opens up. Emily’s dad’s already texted me, telling me he’s eager to attend and is bringing a bunch of friends.”

Emily looks at him. “What are you saying?”

“Telling them that your dad will be there opening night.”

Emily groans. “He’s such a fucking perv. We’re never letting him near our baby.”

“Never, *solnishka*.” Roman kisses her and places his hand back on her lower stomach. It’s an instinctive, protective move that he’s been doing a lot lately, and I can’t help but wonder if I’ll be doing it soon. I hope like hell I will be. Just the thought of it has me grinning at Simona and giving her a wink. She smiles and when I give her thigh a squeeze, she rests her hand on mine and leans into me.

When we’re done eating, my brothers and I clean up, and right when the dishwasher is loaded, Emily comes in from the terrace and asks, “Has anyone seen my pruning shears?”

Roman looks everywhere but at her while Vitaly coughs out a laugh and Lev and Matvey become very interested in wiping the counter down.

“Roman, do you know where they are?”

I’ve seen my brother lie on many occasions, and each time he does it, it’s flawless, so fucking flawless that even though I know it’s bullshit, I can’t help but start to believe it, but he can’t lie to his wife. He stares at her and then runs a hand through his hair and then finally lets out a laugh and shrugs.

“We needed them for something, but I’ll get you a new pair. I promise, *solnishka*. I’ll order them right now.”

He pulls out his phone to place the order when she asks, “What did you need them for?”

When Roman hesitates, Vitaly laughs and says, “You don’t wanna know, Emily.”

Emily and Simona look at each other and then back at us. Simona looks at me and asks, “When did you guys borrow them?”

Turns out I’m also incapable of lying to the woman I love. I scratch at my stubble and say, “Last night.”

“Jesus Christ,” Emily groans. “That’s so gross!”

“He hurt Simona,” I say, because that’s reason enough, but then I add, “he also hurt Alina and countless other women.”

“I know. Roman told me some of the details this morning,” Emily says, looking between Roman and Matvey to make sure they’re okay. “I’m glad you killed him.”

“Me too,” Simona says, giving me a smile, and fuck if that doesn’t make me proud. I may not be able to give her a normal life, but I can kill any motherfucker who ever dares to hurt her, so at least I’ve got that going for me.

“He didn’t die a happy man,” Matvey says.

“That may be the biggest understatement I’ve ever heard,” Vitaly says with a laugh before popping another chip in his mouth.

Thankfully Simona and Emily seem content with just knowing that and not asking for more details. I’m not so sure they’d still be smiling if they knew exactly how unhappy Stefan was when he took his last breath.

Simona can sense how antsy I am, even though I’m not giving any outward sign of being anything but calm. She still picks up on the subtle clues that only she can recognize—the way I’m gripping the edge of the counter a little tighter than needed, the smile I give her that isn’t quite as big as usual, and the way my fingers are curling around the back of her neck so I can feel her pulse beneath my fingers and count the beats.

Grabbing my hand, she leads me back downstairs while the others go off to do their own thing. I’ve been worried that Simona might feel like I’m neglecting her by burying my head in my computer instead of between her legs, but when she pulls me over to my desk and gently pushes on my chest to get me to sit down, she cups my face and smiles.

“I know you have important work to do, so stop feeling guilty about it. I’m not going anywhere, so do what you need to do.”

I pull her into my lap and kiss her hard. As soon as I finish what I need to do, I’m buying this woman the biggest fucking ring I can find. She deserves everything, and I’m going to be the lucky bastard who gets to give it to her.

When she pulls back, we’re both breathless, and she’s giving me a cute, loopy grin. I run my thumb over her swollen lips, smiling when she lets out a sexy moan.

“Thanks for understanding, baby. I’ll be as fast as I can.”

“Take as long as you need. I’ll be here when you need me.”

She kisses my thumb before standing back up, and as soon as our bodies are separated, I feel the loss of her and want her back. Thoughts of finding Alina and bringing her back home force my attention to my computer. Simona kisses my head before walking away. I hear her go back into her music room, and then I get to work.

I lose myself completely, not even aware of the passing of time. Simona brings me plates of food and massages my shoulders, and when she feels like I’ve gone too long without sleep, she grabs my hand and forces me to lay down. When I try and resist, she unzips my pants and pulls my cock out,

wrapping the wet heat of her mouth around me until all I can do is fist her hair and growl for her to take me deeper. She makes me come so fucking hard that my body is completely spent and I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep, just like she knew I would. God, how did I fucking survive without her?

The next morning, I wake before the sun and return the favor, feasting on her sweet pussy until I've pulled several orgasms from her and she's so exhausted she immediately falls back asleep. Smiling, I take a quick shower and then get back to work.

Work, food when Simona insists, and sex that's downright feral is our daily schedule for the next several days. When it's only a few hours from Pink's opening night, I finally find what I'm looking for. My heart races when I see the money trail I've connected. I've got to hand it to whoever is behind all this, because they've covered their tracks. It was damn near impossible to connect all the dots, but I did, and it's staring at me from the large screen on my desk.

When I went through the Red Viper's accounts, I'd found payments being made to and from a company called Swan Investments, and now I have proof that they're behind everything, every damn thing. Every single money trail eventually leads back to them. They even own the fucking club in Romania that Simona was brought to and the rundown hotel they've converted into a holding cell until the women get transported to the auctions. They own everything, and they use their own private jet to bring the women into the country. Less than twelve hours before the auction I bought Simona at, a plane landed at a private airfield about an hour away, and the plane left again before the auction had even ended.

I know the two men that Simona saw were on that goddamn plane. We known it's a Bratva that's running this, and after hours of research, I've narrowed it down to three that are big enough and powerful enough to run something of this magnitude: the Zolotov Bratva, the Fedin Bratva, and the Lebedev Bratva.

As soon as I see the name Lebedev, I know it's the one. Simona is still playing the piano, so I grab my laptop and run upstairs, hollering for my brothers in Russian as I go. They come barreling in as I set my computer on the counter, and when they see the look on my face, they put their guns away and their shoulders relax.

“Fucking hell, you just gave me a heart attack,” Roman says, tucking his gun into the waistband of his pants while Lev just shakes his head at me and Vitaly laughs.

It’s Matvey who steps closer and says, “Show me what you found.”

And I do. I show them everything, and when they see the list of three Bratvas and they read Lebedev, they all start smiling. *Lebed* means swan in Russian. The Swan Investments name paired with the feather tattoo that Simona had seen on his hand—it all fits.

“The fucking Lebedev Bratva,” Matvey growls.

The Bratva wasn’t active in Moscow; they ran out of Saint Petersburg, just like Stefan mentioned, but we’ve all heard of them, and they would occasionally venture into Moscow territory. They could’ve easily been behind Alina’s abduction. They have a reputation for being brutal, the same as all of us, but they’re widespread, and there’s been rumors about them being involved in sex trafficking, but that’s not an uncommon rumor. Most Bratvas are involved in trafficking in some way or another.

“All the money goes to Swan Investments,” I tell them. “They’re behind everything, every fucking thing.”

Simona comes up the stairs, looking around at me and my brothers. She knows something big has just happened, but she doesn’t understand a word of the Russian we’ve been speaking. That doesn’t stop her, though. She immediately walks up to me and wraps her arms around me, hugging me tightly.

“What did you find?”

I cup the back of her head and wrap my other arm around her. It feels so right to have her with me, like she was always meant to be here. I kiss her forehead, breathing in the scent of her, and just like it always does, it soothes me on a deep level, slowing my heart and quieting my racing mind.

“I need you to look at some photos for me, *sladkaya*.”

Her blue eyes meet mine, and I see the worry in them, so I quickly say, “Nothing like that, baby, just some photos of some men. I need to know if you recognize them.”

She nods and lets go of me so I can pull up the photos I found earlier. The Lebedev brothers don’t like their photos being taken, so it took a long time to find one, but I’d managed to find one on the dark web. It was taken outside of a club, and the photo is at least five years old, but it’s clear and easily shows both their faces.

As soon as the photo comes up, Simona lets out a soft gasp. “It’s them,” she whispers, clutching at my arm. She points at Konstantin. “That’s the one they called Pakhan.” Then she points to his brother, Osip. “He was with him, but I could tell the other man was the one in charge.” She looks up at me. “Who are they?”

“Konstantin and Osip Lebedev,” I tell her. “They run the Lebedev Bratva, and they’re the ones who are behind all of this.”

She surprises me by cupping my face and pulling me closer. Her blue eyes are filled with pride and love. “I knew you’d find them. You’re a goddamn genius, Danil.”

To my absolute amazement, I feel my cheeks heat up. I’ve never blushed before in my life, but her praise and the look of absolute and complete trust is making me heat up like a schoolgirl. She gives me one of her beautiful smiles, the one that she saves just for me, and then kisses me, and I swear I love her so much it’s like a fucking ache in my chest.

“What are we going to do about this?” Matvey asks, breaking my Simona trance. “How can we get them?”

“Now that we know who it is, we can track them, follow them, find out a way to get close to them, and then when the time is right, we take them and make them tell us where Alina is,” I tell him. “I’m going to set up alerts, so I’ll be notified of any mention of their Bratva or Swan Investments. We’ll know the second they board their private jet, we’ll know what cities they’re in, and we’ll know exactly how to find them. They own properties all over the world, and right now they’re in Berlin, just like Stefan mentioned.”

Roman scrubs a hand over his face and sighs. “I can’t fucking believe it. What’s stopping us from flying to Berlin and just taking them now?”

Matvey perks up at that, but I was expecting them to want to jump to this, and I don’t blame them, but it’s not the smartest move.

“Because all we have right now is the element of surprise. We know who they are, but they have no fucking clue who we are or that we’re hunting them. One wrong move and they go underground and we never see Alina again.”

“He’s right,” Lev says, and I know he’s seeing this as clearly as I am. Roman and Matvey are too close to this, too emotionally involved, and they’re not looking at the big picture right now.

“They’ll be coming back soon,” Vitaly says, “and when they come back into our city, we’re going to be ready.”

“Agreed,” I say. “Everyone will be at Pink tonight. We’ll go, act like we’ve been acting, keep getting closer and building relationships with those involved, and making damn sure no one suspects anything. All the dancers will be listening in to everything that’s said.”

I look from Roman to Matvey. “We’re going to get her. It’s only a matter of time now.”

They both nod, but I know it’s taking all their willpower to not go out there and find these bastards and torture them very slowly until they give us what we want. The only problem is there’s no guarantee they will. Men like Konstantin and Osip don’t cave easily. They’re not like Stefan. If they withstood the torture, and there’s a very good chance they would, then we’d never find Alina. Her location would die with them, and I know damn good and well that Matvey wouldn’t survive that. Roman would for the sake of Emily and their unborn child, but it would kill Matvey. We all know it, and that’s what will keep us all from doing something stupid.

“I’m going to go and let Emily know what we’ve found,” Roman says. She’s been getting tired more easily, and Roman’s been insisting she take daily naps. Before he walks off, he stops and grabs her an orange juice from the fridge because he’s adamant that she get enough folic acid. He’s going to be a helicopter parent, and it makes me laugh every time I think about it.

“You need to eat something,” Simona says, giving me another kiss. “I’ll get you some leftovers.”

“Thanks, baby,” I tell her, giving her perfect ass a soft smack as she walks away.

Matvey’s still studying my computer, and I don’t even feel irritated when he touches my trackpad to look around some more. God, Simona is changing me in so many ways.

“Simona’s coming tonight, right?” Lev asks.

“Yeah, I want her there with me,” I tell him, even though I know this club’s purpose is to give these men a safe place to come together without it being associated with the Red Viper and trafficking. “The men will see her tattoo and know what it means, but since we’re running the club, it’ll be expected that I’ll show her off.”

“Emily’s so pissed that she can’t go,” Vitaly says, walking over and stealing a piece of pasta from the plate Simona’s making me. She smacks

his hand, but he just laughs.

“Why can’t she go?” Simona asks. “Because she’s pregnant?”

Vitaly laughs again, but there’s no real humor in it. “No, because her dad will be there. He thinks Roman has a Russian pet on the side, and that’s who he’s going to expect tonight. Emily can’t just show up in her slutty dress and wig, though, because daddy dearest will definitely recognize her.”

“That’s fucked up,” Simona says.

“It is,” Vitaly agrees. “It’ll be okay, though. All the women know not to touch him, so she doesn’t have to worry about that at least. Roman would make a big scene if any of them tried to, and we can’t have that, so I’ve told all of them that if they touch Roman or Matvey, they’re fired.”

“They can’t touch Danil either,” she says, making me smile.

Vitaly grins at her. “No, they can’t, but Danil will already be making that clear when he walks in with you on his arm.”

Lev lets out a heavy sigh. “They can touch me if they want, I guess. I’ll take one for the team.”

“How kind of you,” Vitaly tells him.

Lev shrugs. “I’m a giver.”

They laugh while Matvey keeps studying my computer. Tonight will be the first time he’ll be meeting these men, and he’s only doing it because of what Vitaly said. Every woman at that club will be giving him a wide berth. I’m not looking forward to having Simona around them again, but she’ll be glued to my side the whole night, and our security is a thousand times better than anything the Red Viper has. I set up the security system myself, and we’ve hired our own men as bouncers. They’ll be heavily armed, and they’re highly trained. Everyone except us will be searched for weapons, so we’ll already have an advantage. Perks of being the club owners. Unfortunately, there’s no way to avoid the Barinov brothers, who are still under the impression that they’re in charge.

As if the fucker can sense my thoughts, my phone buzzes in my pocket. When I see Oleg’s name, I flip my brothers off yet again and answer.

“Oleg, what’s up?”

Lev and Vitaly laugh while Matvey gives a small smirk.

Oleg seems as surprised as I am that I actually answered my phone. I give Simona a wink and take the plate she’s made me.

“I just wanted to make sure everything was set for tonight,” he says. “Need me to do anything? You and your brothers still coming?”

And this is why Oleg will never be Pakhan of anything. He's not a leader; he's a follower who thinks he's a leader.

"Everything's set," I tell him, pulling Simona into my lap. She kisses my cheek and then pinches off a piece of French bread. "We'll be there."

"Okay, great. I'll just see you guys there, I guess."

"Sure thing," I say and then quickly hang up before he can ask if we can have a sleepover afterwards and braid each other's fucking hair.

I look at my brothers. "I'm seriously never going to forgive you fuckers for giving him my number."

They just laugh while Lev says, "You'll get over it. You know you can't stay mad at us. Besides, he'll stop calling soon enough."

"Why will he stop calling?" Simona asks and I give Lev a look that makes him hold his hands up with a laugh.

"Sorry, brother," he says and then walks out of the goddamn room while Simona waits for an answer. Vitaly follows him and then Matvey disappears back downstairs, leaving me with a very curious woman on my lap.

I kiss her cheek and take a big bite of pasta.

"Danil, why's he going to stop calling?"

I point towards my stuffed mouth, but she's not going to just forget because I'm chewing. When I go to take another bite, she scoots my plate out of reach and raises a brow at me. I can't help but grin, because god do I like her feisty side. It makes me want to spank her, and when my cock grows hard, her blue eyes darken and her lips part the tiniest bit.

"Are you going to answer me?"

Resting my hand on her hip, I give her a squeeze and rock my hips up just enough to really let her feel my cock against her ass. When I bring my other hand to hers, dragging my fingers along her arm before wrapping them around her wrist so I can feel how fast her heart is beating, she lets out a moan that's just loud enough for me to hear.

"Stop trying to distract me," she whispers.

"Why not?" I ask with a grin. "It's working so beautifully."

She leans closer and brings her mouth to my ear. "Please tell me." Her breath is hot against my ear, and when she gives my earlobe a soft suck, she lets her teeth graze my skin, and I'm helpless to deny her anything.

"Because we're going to kill them soon," I say.

Instead of jumping off my lap, she pulls back so she can see me. "Do you have to?"

“Yes. They’ve served their purpose, and now they’re just in the way. They’re also untrustworthy and sloppy and they know too much. If we keep them alive, there’s no guarantee they won’t do something stupid like go to another Bratva for help in getting revenge. Keeping them alive puts you and Emily at risk, and that’s not something any of us are willing to do.”

She thinks about what I’ve said, and when she meets my eyes again, I run my thumb over her fast-beating heart and say, “I will never allow any harm to come to you. Anyone who hurts you or could potentially be a threat to you gets killed. It’s as simple as that.”

I can tell she wants to ask something, and when she hesitates, I give her a kiss and say, “Ask me, baby. What is it?”

The fingers of her right hand play a tune on my chest while she bites her bottom lip and finally says, “Are you going to use pruning shears again?”

I laugh because it’s the last thing I was expecting. “No, *sladkaya*. It’ll be a quick bullet to the head. Stefan was different. That was personal. He violated you, and I wanted him to pay for that.”

She confirms my belief that she’s absolutely perfect for me when she gives a nod and then kisses me again. “Okay. I know you’ll always keep me safe, Danil, and I trust you. One day we’re going to have a family, and the last thing I want is to always have to worry about our baby being safe.”

“You will never have to worry about that,” I tell her, meaning every word of it, and then I smile at the thought of her pregnant with our baby.

“You want a family, right?”

I smile even bigger. “Yes, baby, I want a family. I never did before, but I do now.”

“Really?”

I can’t help but laugh. “Sweetheart, before I met you if anyone had mentioned the word baby, I would’ve broken out in a cold sweat. It would’ve been a nightmare, the last thing I would’ve wanted or needed, but with you, it’s all I can fucking think about.”

Resting my hand on her stomach, I imagine it big and swollen, and when my cock grows even harder, she raises a brow at me and gives a soft laugh.

“The idea of you pregnant, *sladkaya*, goddamn, it drives me fucking crazy.”

Forgetting all about the plate of food, I stand up and take her with me, carrying her back to our room. She kisses me the whole way, wrapping her

arms and legs around me and running her hands through my hair, and as soon as I shut the door, she's tugging on my shirt, wanting me just as much as I'm wanting and needing her.

When we're naked and she's lying on the bed beneath me, I slide into the tight, wet heat of her while she clings to me and moans my name, and it's fucking perfect. It always feels like I'm right where I'm supposed to be when I'm inside her. It's a feeling I've come to crave, and I need it now, just like I need air or water or food.

I kiss my way down her delicate neck while my fingers part her lips so she can suck me deep. God, her mouth is a work of fucking art. She runs her tongue over my fingers before sucking me in even deeper while I fuck her sweet pussy and feel the frantic beat of her heart against my tongue.

"You want my cum, baby," I whisper against her skin. "You want me to fill this tight pussy with my seed?"

"Mm-hmm," she whimpers, digging her nails into my back and rocking her hips up even more.

"Every part of you is mine," I growl, "and inch by beautiful inch, I'm going to mark your body as mine. There won't be a spot left on you that's free of me. I will cover you in bruises that you'll beg me for and handprints from the spankings that you'll come to crave, and my cum will always be somewhere on or in your body. You will feel me with you every second of every goddamn day for the rest of your life, just like I carry you around with me, always needing you, always wanting you, and always craving you."

She whimpers and sucks my fingers harder when I circle my hips and thrust in deep, hitting her right where she needs me to.

"You want my cum, baby?" I ask her again.

"Mm-hmm," she moans.

I slowly slide my fingers out and pat her cheek with my wet fingers. "Beg me for it, *sladkaya*."

"Please, Danil," she whimpers, her raspy voice tinged with a wild hunger that threatens to push me over the edge, but I grit my teeth and fuck her harder.

"Not good enough, baby," I growl against her skin as I cup one of her bouncing tits in my hand and pinch her nipple hard enough to pull a sexy mewling sound from her shaking body. "Try again, sweetheart."

“Please, Danil,” she gasps. “Please give me your cum. I need it. Fuck, I need it so bad.” She kisses my shoulder and drags her nails down my spine, sending a shiver of pure bliss through every part of me. “Fill my pussy,” she begs. “Please, sir!”

Hearing her call me sir as she begs for my seed sends me over the edge, just like she knew it would, and as I let go, I pinch her nipple hard and take her with me. Fisting my hair, she brings her mouth to mine, kissing me through her release as her entire body tightens around me. Her tight little cunt milks me of every goddamn thing I have, and by the time I’m empty, my ears are ringing, I’m covered in sweat, and panting for air.

“Goddamn,” I say with a soft laugh.

She smiles and gives me a slow, lazy kiss. “I love you,” she whispers.

“I love you too, baby, so fucking much.”

I roll us over so she’s lying on top of me, her soft breaths hitting my neck as I run my hands along her bare back and ass.

“I wish we could just stay home tonight.”

I brush back a sweaty strand of her hair and run my knuckles gently down her cheek. “If you want to stay home, you can. You don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

“No way in hell am I staying here while you go hang out at a strip club.”

“Baby, I would never cheat on you. I don’t even want to look at another woman. All I want is you.”

“I know you would never cheat on me, but I still want to go with you. I’m curious about the club, and they should see you with your pet.”

I give one of her perfect cheeks a hard enough spank to make her yelp. “I want you wearing more clothes tonight. I can’t stand them all looking at you while they think about fucking you. It drives me crazy.”

She lifts up and gives me a sexy smirk. “Whatever you say, sir.”

I smile and smack her ass again. “I will never get tired of hearing you call me that.”

She laughs and gives me a kiss. “Come on, we need to hurry up or we’re going to be late. Someone in this room doesn’t know the meaning of the word quickie.”

“Can you blame me? I don’t want quick with you. I want to bury myself as deeply as I can get and then stay there for the rest of my life.”

“That’ll make for some awkward family dinners.”

I laugh and cup her ass. “That it would, baby.”

We both force ourselves to get up, but when she walks to the shower, I stop her. “Don’t wash me off, *sladkaya*. I want you covered in me tonight. I want my scent all over your body and my seed dripping from that sweet pussy of yours.”

Her eyes darken at my words. “Fine, but you don’t get to shower either. I want my scent all over you, too.”

I smile down at her. “Always, baby.”

She picks out a more modest black dress while I start putting on an all-black suit. I watch her pick out a lacy thong that has an attached garter belt before rolling on a pair of thigh highs. My breath stills while she fastens the clips in place. It’s such an erotic sight, and I can’t look away. The lace looks amazing against her skin, so fucking delicate and feminine, and I want nothing more than to fuck her so hard that it tears holes in the lace.

Her soft laugh pulls me from my thoughts. She’s caught me staring, and the mischievous glint in her eyes lets me know she likes that I was. When she bends over to step into her dress, I let out a groan at the sight of her bare ass with nothing but a lacy string between her perfect round cheeks.

“I’m never going to be soft again, am I?” I ask, only partly joking. I’ve pretty much resigned myself to the fact that I’ll always be dealing with an uncomfortable erection when she’s around.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” she says, making me laugh.

I step closer and grab her hips, squeezing the soft flesh and pulling her back against me so she can feel what she’s doing.

“That’s cruel, *sladkaya*.”

She wiggles her ass against me, turning it into a slow, sensual rocking movement that has me gritting my teeth and digging my fingers in even harder.

“No, babe, *that’s* cruel,” she corrects before laughing and putting some space between us.

I pull her back and kiss the crook of her neck, running my tongue over her soft skin. “Tease me all you want, sweetheart. Payback is going to be so fucking fun. I’m going to edge you for hours, keeping you right on the edge of your release until you’re crying and begging me to let you come.”

I give her neck a hard enough bite to make her squirm before finally releasing her and zipping up the back of her dress.

“You look gorgeous in that dress, by the way.”

She turns around, and I smile at how flushed her face is. She watches me finish getting dressed, eye-fucking the hell out of me the whole time, before slipping into the bathroom to put on her makeup. When she's done, she puts on a pair of heels and grabs my arm.

"I'm ready, and you look fucking amazing in that suit, Danil. You're sexier than any man has a right to be, and I can't believe you're mine."

I cup her face and kiss her. "I can't believe you're mine either, *sladkaya*. It feels like a dream sometimes, and I'm so afraid I'm going to wake up from it."

She cups the back of my head, running her fingers through my hair as she gives me a sweet smile. "I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

I hug her, needing to feel her body against mine, and kiss her until we can't put off going any longer. Grabbing her hand, I kiss the back of it and then kiss the tattoo around her wrist, knowing it's a constant reminder of what happened to her.

"We're getting that removed as soon as we get Alina back."

She smiles and gives me a soft nod. "Sounds good to me."

"Okay, baby. Time to go back into the nest of vipers."

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Chapter 12

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Simona

When we go upstairs, his brothers are waiting for us. They're all wearing suits, all looking like they stepped off the cover of some sexy bad boy magazine. It's insane how good looking they all are, but the only one to make my heart race is currently holding my hand and looking at me with the most beautiful grey eyes I've ever seen.

I never thought in a million years that not only would I be standing next to a man like Danil, but that I'd be doing it with a sore pussy that's dripping the cum I'd just begged him for. Life is crazy like that, I guess. All I can do is be grateful for this turn of events and never take it for granted. Not for the first time, I wonder what my parents would've thought of him. Even though Danil's dangerous and obviously has no problem killing people, I still think they would've loved him. They would've loved how he treats me, how protective he is, and how he makes me feel like I'm the most important person in the world to him. Plus, they would've never known about any of that other stuff. We would've protected them from that.

I'm still thinking about how much I wish they could've met him when Danil cups my chin and tilts my face to his. He studies me with those eyes that never miss a single detail.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I say, giving him a smile.

"You look sad. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that I wish my parents could've met you," I admit because I know it'll drive him crazy if I don't tell him.

"Baby," he whispers, giving me a soft kiss. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could've met them too. I'd love to have been able to meet the two people

responsible for creating the woman I love more than life itself."

I grip his shoulders, feeling the tears build but refusing to let them fall. "God, you're such a softie," I say, making him laugh.

"Yeah, you have no idea how many times people have called me that throughout my life."

I smile because I love that I'm the only one who gets to really see this side of him, but it's the truth. He may run one hell of a dangerous Bratva with his brothers, but my Danil is a giant softie when it comes to me, and I fucking love it.

"I really hate that I can't go," Emily says when Danil and I walk further into the room.

"I'm sorry, *solnishka*.You know your dad is going to be there," Roman tells her. He's got his arms wrapped around her and he's kissing the top of her head. "I'm driving separately so I can leave early. It'll look weird if I'm not there tonight, though."

"I know, but I still hate it."

"Me too, baby."

When I hear the elevator ding, I look over and watch Aleksandr step out with another guy I've never met before.

"Seriously, Roman?" she asks, but I can tell she's not really mad.

Roman shrugs and gives her a smile. "I love you and you're pregnant, *solnishka*. I'm not leaving you here alone."

She sighs and kisses him before turning to the men who are still waiting patiently for orders. "All right, Aleksandr, we're showing Grigori how it's done tonight." She looks back up at her husband. "I'm beating your high score tonight. I just want you to know that."

He laughs and picks her up before kissing her. "Give it your best shot, baby."

She hugs him fiercely before letting go and heading downstairs. Roman tells the men something in Russian that has them both nodding and saying what I'm assuming is yes, sir in Russian. I make a mental note to try and remember that one so I can surprise Danil with it later.

"Okay, let's do this," Vitaly says with a big grin once the orders for Emily's bodyguards have been given.

In the elevator, Vitaly says, "I see Danil made you choose a less slutty dress for tonight."

“I did,” Danil says, pulling me closer to him. “They’ve stared at her enough.”

“I know that feeling,” Roman says. “It drove me fucking crazy to have them all staring at Emily.”

“You’re going to be the most overdressed woman at the club tonight,” Lev says with a laugh.

“Awesome,” I mutter, already dreading this night.

“Just take it off and walk around in your undies,” Vitaly says. “You’ll fit right in.”

Danil says something in Russian that has his brothers laughing while Vitaly shakes his head and says to me in English, “He has a real temper, you know? Everyone thinks he’s more of the quiet, computer genius guy, but he’s actually one of the meanest motherfuckers I know.”

I look up at Danil and smile. “He’s pretty sweet to me.”

“He’s pretty sweet to me, too,” Matvey says, and it’s the first time I’ve heard him crack a joke. He gives me a smile, and I happily return it. I can’t wait to see him with Alina. If anyone deserves a happy ending, it’s those two, and I’m so glad I’ll be here to see it.

“See?” Danil says as the elevator doors open. “I’m just a big sweetheart.”

Lev and Vitaly laugh. “Yeah, that’s you in a nutshell.”

Matvey rides with Roman while the rest of us get into the SUV. They follow us to the club, and as soon as I see how packed it is, I let out a low whistle.

“Damn, Vitaly, nice job.”

He looks back and smiles at me. “Thanks, Simona. I’m guessing you probably hate strip clubs, but I’m hoping you’ll like what I’ve done to this place.”

I look at the lit-up building, and he’s right, I do hate strip clubs, but this place looks nice. It’s not tacky with a giant pair of tits on the sign or anything. It’s just a neon pink sign that reads *Pink* all set against a black building. It could easily be an upscale nightclub. I’d never look at this place and think it was a sleazy strip club. It’s the kind of place that would make me want to stop in for a drink.

“It looks really nice,” I tell him.

Danil kisses the top of my head while Lev parks near the front. Taking my hand, he helps me out and then wraps an arm around me, keeping me

close to his strong body.

"This is where you stay all night, *sladkaya*," he tells me. "You're not to leave my damn side. If you have to go to the bathroom, let me know, and I'll walk you to and from it." He cups my face and searches my eyes. "Promise me."

"I promise," I quickly say. "I won't leave your side."

He gives me a nod and a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. I know he worries and hates me having to go out in public as his pet, but at least we get to go out together. It would kill me if he had to pretend with someone else.

When Roman and Matvey join us, we all walk towards the front together. Matvey runs a hand through his dark hair, and I'm guessing he's wishing he was wearing one of his many hoodies right now. The line at the front door is long, and I'm not going to lie, bypassing it while being surrounded by five Melnikov brothers makes me feel like fucking royalty. The women in line can't take their eyes off the wall of tattooed muscle passing them by, and when they look at me, I can see the confusion. I want to tell them I'm just as surprised by it as they are, but Danil stops me and cups my face, tilting me up to him.

"What were you just thinking?"

I dart my eyes to the crowd behind him.

"Don't look at them, baby. Look at me. What were you thinking?"

"The women were all staring at you and your brothers, and then they seemed confused when they saw me with you instead of some drop-dead gorgeous model. I was just thinking that I wanted to tell them I was just as surprised as they are." I give a soft laugh, but Danil doesn't join in. His lips don't even curl up the tiniest bit. He's not happy with what I've just said.

Instead of saying anything, he closes the distance and kisses me slowly. I hear a couple of the women let out surprised gasps, but I no longer care about any of them or what they think. I'm too busy kissing the man I've fallen completely in love with. He kisses me slowly, lighting my body on fire with every stroke of his tongue. When he pulls back, I'm breathless and his eyes are dark with barely contained lust.

"I'm the one who's unworthy to stand next to you, *sladkaya*. Don't ever forget that, and don't ever let someone else make you doubt how goddamn perfect you are. You are mine, baby, and I don't ever want anyone else standing next to me."

He gives my bottom lip a soft suck. “Can you still feel my cum between your legs?”

“Yes,” I whisper, because thanks to that kiss, I’m soaking wet, and I know it’s not all from my arousal. He’s mixed in there, too, just like he wanted.

“Good. Let it remind you who you belong to and how fucking much I love you.”

I nod and let out a shaky breath. This time when I look up at him, he smiles and gives me a wink before wrapping his arm back around me and leading me to where his brothers are waiting by the door. The two bouncers at the entrance look like they could take down anyone or anything who tried to fuck with them or cause trouble. They’re intimidating as hell in their dark, tactical-looking clothing and fierce eyes that are taking in every fucking detail around them.

When they look at Danil and his brothers, though, they immediately drop their eyes and give a respectful nod before speaking to them in Russian. They open the doors for us, letting us in while the others are forced to wait, and once we’re in, I look back and watch as they start to frisk the next person in line. They are taking no chances with this club.

Stepping inside, I’m momentarily stunned by what I see. I knew the outside looked nice, but I was still thinking it would look similar to the Red Viper, but this place is nothing like that. It’s huge and open and aside from all the nearly naked women, it looks downright classy. There are three large stages, each with a pole dancer as well as a few poles placed strategically around the place—all of them currently occupied by gorgeous dancers who are defying gravity with every move they make.

My insecurities all start to come back, but Danil leans down and whispers in my ear. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, *sladkaya*. None of these other women even fucking exist to me.”

I smile and kiss his cheek, whispering how much I love him against his dark stubble. He gives my ear a soft bite and then leads me to one of the long bars. There’s a gorgeous blonde behind the counter, pouring drink after drink without missing a beat. When she sees Danil and his brothers, she gives them a big smile and says something in Russian.

Danil switches to English and says, “Mila, I want you to meet Simona.” Danil looks at me and winks. “She’s married to Timofey, one of our best men.”

I look at Mila, who's beaming with pride from the compliment Danil just gave about her husband. I smile at her and say, "It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you, too," she says, and I know that sexy accent is going to earn her a hell of a lot of tips. She looks from me to Danil and gives a small smirk before saying something to him in Russian.

When she sees my confused look, she leans closer and says, "I'm just teasing him for falling in love. He was always so adamant he never would."

"She proved me wrong," Danil says, smiling down at me.

Mila laughs while she pours us all a drink. I gladly take mine, knowing this is going to be a long night. While I sip it, I turn back around and take a better look at the club. The lighting is low enough to feel intimate but not so low that it's annoying. There's a main area in front of the stages that's filled with small curved seats and tables so people can watch and order some food and drinks, but there's also other more private areas spread along the outside of the room.

When I scan the corners of the room, I see several men getting lap dances, but there's also a few that just seem to be enjoying a nice meal while they watch the beautiful women around them. Looking up, I see another level that's built into a large circle so they can look down and see everything that's happening below.

"The VIP section," Danil whispers. "That's where we'll be spending the evening."

"Fancy," I say, making him smile. When I see a couple of hallways along the back wall, I ask him, "Where do those lead to?"

Leaning down so our faces are lightly touching, he says, "One leads to the main office and the dressing rooms, and the other is filled with private rooms that people can use."

"Use for what?"

"Whatever the hell they want as long as it's consensual. Every woman who works here is Russian and under strict orders to pretend to speak very little English. They're spying on these men for us, but some of them aren't going to have a problem with doing extra if it gets them more money. It's their choice, though. Vitaly made it very clear that it's not expected."

I look around at the beautiful women, so many of them are just sitting on men's laps, smiling and grinding, playing into the part of just being a decoration. God, it's the perfect cover. These men already think of women

as being beneath them, and they're going to let a lot of information slip out once the drinks start flowing.

"I'm going to walk around and make sure everything's going like I want it to," Vitaly says. "I'll meet you guys upstairs later."

He walks off with a grin and immediately starts shaking hands and laughing with a group of men who've just sat down at a nearby table. He's damn good at this. No one suspects he's anything but a club owner who loves to surround himself with beautiful women. Some also think he has an interest in trafficked women, but none of them suspect he's actually plotting to take them all down.

"Let's go upstairs, baby," Danil says when his brothers start walking towards the stairs in the corner. We're almost to them when I hear a very feminine voice yell Danil's name.

"Fucking hell," he groans before turning us both around.

The woman walking over to us with a big smile on her face is stunning. She's petite with pretty, long, blonde hair, and a body that I would seriously consider killing someone for. I know how amazing it is, because just about every inch of it is exposed to me thanks to the sparkly pasties and jeweled thong she's wearing. Her dark eyes are glued to Danil, and I see the desire in them, and it really pisses me off. My first thought is that she's an ex-fling, and god that makes my heart hurt.

When Danil feels my body stiffen, he leans down and whispers in my ear, "I've never fucked her, *sladkaya*, and I never wanted to," before he kisses my cheek and pulls me even tighter against his body while standing back up to face the woman who's not looking quite as thrilled as she just was.

She glares at me and says in a thick accent, "Who the fuck is she?"

Danil's body goes rigid before he lets out a string of very angry-sounding Russian. His voice is low so as not to attract attention, but whatever it is he's saying, it's having a big effect on her. While her face goes pale, Danil strokes the nape of my neck in a slow, sensual rhythm. The pad of his thumb runs over my pulse point, sending a shiver down my spine before settling right between my legs. My lips part in the softest of sighs, but he still hears it, and when he does, he meets my eyes and gives me a wink before going back to whatever the hell he was saying. He says one more harsh word before waving his hand at her in the universal *get the fuck*

away from me move, and she turns and bolts away as fast as her stilettos will allow.

“What the hell was that about?” I whisper.

Danil turns to face me, the anger immediately leaving his grey eyes. “That was me making it very clear that she’d better not ever speak to you like that again.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name’s Galina. She’s had a crush on me for a while. I’ve tried very hard to make it clear that nothing will ever happen between us, but she refuses to take the hint. I think maybe she’s got it now, though.”

“Yeah, I think so, too.”

He laughs and kisses my forehead. “I wasn’t trying to be mean to her, but I’ll fucking rip her throat out if she speaks to you like that again.”

“Damn,” I whisper. I’m not someone who likes to hurt other people, but I have no doubt that Galina would’ve jumped in Danil’s lap right in front of me if he would’ve let her, not caring in the slightest about my feelings, and it’s damn nice to have a man who has no desire to do that sort of shit.

He smiles and kisses me again before taking my hand, leading me past the bouncer who’s guarding the VIP entrance and up the flight of stairs. His brothers are already sitting at a large table with the two men I met at the Red Viper on the night of the auction. God, that feels like a lifetime ago.

“Glad you and Aaron could make it,” Danil says, sitting down and pulling me onto his lap so my back is pressed tight against his chest. He splays his hand out across my stomach in a possessive gesture that always makes me want to smile. I resist because David and Aaron are staring at me. I look around at the area we’re in so I don't have to look at them.

The entire VIP section is a large circle filled with tables and private booths. The center is completely open, giving me a clear view of all three stages. There are a few poles and dancers up here as well, but I notice that even though several of the women are walking around advertising their availability, they make sure to give Danil, Roman, and Matvey space. Not a single one of them flirts or offers themselves to these three.

David and Aaron each have a woman in their lap, and when I see a redhead look over at Lev, I’m surprised to see him give a very soft shake of his head to let her know he’s not interested. His dark hair is longer than the others, brushing against the collar of his suit, and the piercings on his lip and eyebrow just add to the overall dangerous vibe he puts out. Of course,

they all look dangerous. My eyes run over Danil and his brothers, each of them has tattoos peeking out from their suits on their hands and necks, each has that deadly glint in their eyes that lets you know it'd be best to not fuck with them, but they're also the sweetest men I've ever met in so many ways. Not many people get to see that side of them, though. I'm pretty sure it's a group that consists of me, Emily, and Alina.

"So we finally get to meet the mysterious fifth Melnikov brother," Aaron says, looking over at Matvey.

"I'm not much of an extrovert," Matvey says in his raspy voice before tossing back the shot in front of him.

David and Aaron wait a beat, but when it's clear that's all they're going to be getting from him, they turn their attention to the other brothers.

"I heard things got a little crazy at Tom's party the other night," David says with a laugh and then looks directly at me while lifting his glass of whiskey. "Heard someone had to be taught a lesson."

I force myself to lower my eyes and act submissive while Danil caresses my stomach with his thumb.

"Looks like she learned from her mistake," Aaron says, giving another laugh. "I can see the fucking bruises from here."

Danil's hand falters for just a second before he starts caressing me again, and when I bring one hand on top of his, he lowers his head and kisses my shoulder. He's not acting like I'm nothing but a plaything, and I'm worried it's going to raise some eyebrows, so when he asks me to hand him his drink, I make a point of saying, "Yes, sir," loud enough for them all to hear.

I see Lev's lip ring move just the tiniest bit like he's trying not to smile, but I keep my face blank and try my best to play the part. It's too bad Vitaly's missing this. I think he would've enjoyed this performance.

David gives Danil an approving nod at his ability to keep his pet so in line and says, "Did any of you happen to see an older Romanian man there?"

Danil's tone gives nothing away when he says, "We saw a lot of older men there, but I'm not sure if they were Romanian or not. Why?"

"Someone important has gone missing. I got a phone call telling me to ask around." David sighs like it's a pain in the ass he has no desire to deal with. "You'd know if you met him. The man barely speaks a word of English."

“Who is he?” Lev asks.

“A doctor,” David says, running his hands down the back of the woman who’s still sitting in his lap. He cups her ass and gives it a squeeze as he says, “He checks the women and helps us sort them when they get to the city.”

I’m taken off guard when David looks at me and asks, “Did you see him there? I know you’ve seen him before.”

I don’t know what to say, so I make a show of looking to Danil like I’m asking for permission to speak. His grey eyes lock on mine when he gives a nod.

“You can answer, pet,” he says.

I slowly turn back to David and say, “I didn’t see him. After my punishment, I kept my head down and didn’t look at anyone.”

David lifts a brow at me. “I don’t get a sir?”

Before I can think better of it, I say, “No, you’re not my master.”

David looks to Danil, probably expecting him to beat the shit out of me for my attitude, but all Danil does is give a deep, genuine laugh before fisting my hair and turning me towards him for a kiss. It’s not a long kiss, but it’s hard and it’s proving a point. I’m *his*, and I belong *only* to him. When he pulls back, he’s rock hard beneath my ass and it takes me a second to remember we’re still in a very crowded room.

David looks less than pleased, but he doesn’t ask me to call him sir again.

“Maybe he just ran off,” Lev says, bringing us all back to Stefan’s disappearance.

“He would never do that,” Aaron says. “He knows what would happen to him if he did.”

“We can have some of our men look into it if you want,” Roman offers.

David thinks for a second before saying, “It sounds like they want to handle this on their own.”

“Well, the offer stands if they change their mind,” Roman says, and I can tell he wants to keep pushing, but he backs off and then lets out a soft laugh when he looks at someone behind me and Danil. “I see my father-in-law has decided to join us.”

Four older men in suits come walking over, and I instantly dislike them. They’re all wearing the same pervy grins and looking around like they can’t wait to sample each and every woman here.

“Roman,” the man in front says, reaching over to shake his hand. “Good to see you. How’s my daughter doing?”

“She’s good, Chris,” he says but doesn’t elaborate. “I’m glad you all could make it.”

The mayor looks down at me, and it’s hard to believe that the sweet woman I’ve been living with came from this bastard. His eyes run over me, and even though I’m in a more modest dress, he makes me feel naked and exposed, and I hate it. Danil’s lips brush my shoulder while he tightens his grip on me.

“I see you’re just as possessive of your pet as your brother is with his.” He turns back to Roman. “Where is your little plaything tonight?”

“Not here. She needed the night off,” he says with a soft laugh.

Danil brings his lips back to my ear while the four men sit down and join us. “The three men with him are congressmen,” he whispers. “Roman’s looking forward to killing his father-in-law.”

I turn my head, and he gives me a faint smile before kissing my shoulder again.

“Was she worth the price tag?” Chris asks after ordering a drink from the waitress who quickly comes over to take care of them.

“Every damn penny,” Danil says.

“What do you say, sweetheart? Do you like your new owner?”

I ignore his stupid-ass questions and tuck my head in close to Danil. Chris laughs when he doesn’t get an answer.

“She’s been taught to only obey your voice, I see.”

“She knows who she belongs to,” Danil says while the waitress hands out the drinks she’s brought.

“Sweetheart,” Chris calls out when she starts to walk away. “My friends here would like to spend some time in the back rooms. Can you get them set up with some women of their choice?”

The waitress smiles and says in a very thick accent, “Women, yes?”

Chris laughs. “Do they speak English here?”

“They understand enough,” Roman says. “Just a few essential phrases.”

Lev laughs. “They know lap dance, blowjob, fucking, and you owe me money.”

The men all have a good laugh while the waitress leads the three men away. I’m sure they all made sure to pop a viagra before coming here tonight.

“I was hoping to get to Tom’s party the other night, but something came up,” Chris says.

“I didn’t know you went to the after-auction parties,” Danil says.

Chris smiles and takes a drink. “Tom’s an old friend, and he said he was going to be sharing his newest purchase, so I was hoping I’d get to go. I also wanted to see the woman who went for $3.5 million,” he says, giving me a wink. “I”m guessing Danil wasn’t willing to share you, though.”

“No, I was not,” Danil says. “I don’t share what’s mine.”

“No one taught the Melnikov brothers how to share their toys,” David cuts in with a laugh.

I know how pissed Danil is getting at the idea of sharing me, but he hides it well and laughs along with the rest before saying, “I did meet the man who lost the bid to me. He wasn’t happy about it.”

“I should think not,” David says. “It’s the first time he’s ever lost one. He usually has his pick of the women.”

“Dominic was very pissed when I told him I wasn’t interested in selling her to him,” Danil says.

“Dominic Alessi?” Chris asks. “You’ve made yourself quite the enemy, my friend.”

“Alessi?” Roman asks, shooting a quick look to his brothers. “As in the Italian crime family who runs the East side of the city?”

“That’d be the one,” Chris says. “I have to mingle with them occasionally, but for the most part they stick to their side of the city and stay out of politics. Dominic likes the trafficking side of things, though. His dad runs the family, and rumor has it his son is more than ready to step in and take over.”

“Well, they better fucking stay out of our business,” David says. “Dominic likes to come to the auctions, and we’ve allowed him to do so because he has money to spend, but so far he’s been content to just buy and leave.”

“And he buys a lot,” Aaron says, “and once he’s bought a woman, they’re never really seen again.”

“He must go through them like you tend to do,” Chris says, smiling at Roman.

Roman gives a good-natured laugh while David says, “We don’t give a fuck what he does with them, but if his family starts butting in, it’s going to really piss off some people.”

“And we don’t want them pissed off,” Chris says with a harsh laugh.

“The Bratva in charge of all this, you mean?” Danil says and then gives a soft laugh at the surprised look on David’s and Aaron’s faces. “Oh come on, we’re not stupid, and we’re Russian, remember? We know how these things work.”

“You might want to forget that you know anything at all,” David says. “They’re very dangerous men.”

“Aren’t we all?” Danil says with a smile. “But don’t worry, we’re happy to sit back and buy the women they get for us.”

“Fuck yeah we are,” Lev says, raising his shot before downing it in one go.

Chris notices Lev’s bruised knuckles. “What the hell happened to you?”

Lev gives a big smile that stretches his lip ring to the side. “I’m involved in a bit of underground fighting.”

“You fight with piercings?” Aaron asks.

“I do.”

“Damn,” David says.

“Is there betting involved?” Chris asks.

“There is, yeah. People place bets all the time.”

The men think for a second, and I can see the greed coming to the surface and taking over. Finally, David says, “I might know of quite a few men who would like to get in on this. Give me a call when your next fight is scheduled. We can set it up so you get a cut of all the money.” He smiles and adds, “If you win, of course.”

“I always win.”

There’s no bravado in it, just plain honesty, and David’s about to ask something else when another voice cuts in.

“What are you guys doing hiding up here?”

Danil lets out a soft groan that only I can hear before he turns and says, “Hey, Oleg.”

Oleg grins down at Danil, and I try very hard to not laugh. He’s standing with two women on either side of him. His arms are wrapped around their waists like he’s the fucking king of some harem. Two men who have the same dark blond hair as Oleg and similar face structures are standing right behind him. They’ve got to be his brothers.

Danil looks at the men sitting across from us. “This is Oleg Barinov and his brothers, Alexei and Ivan.” Pointing at David he goes down the line and

says, “This is David, Aaron, and Chris, good friends of ours.”

Oleg almost looks jealous when Danil says that, and if I wasn’t watching him drag his finger up this poor girl’s ass crack right now, I might actually feel sorry for him.

“Who’s she?” Oleg asks, looking down at me. “Is she one of ours?”

“She’s my girlfriend,” Danil says. “She doesn’t work here.”

By calling me his girlfriend, he’s letting the other men know that the Barinov brothers are clueless as to what’s really going on, and when they all sit down and join us, the conversation turns to other things, mainly the women and how fucking hot they all are.

The plus side to having the Barinov brothers with us is that I’m supposed to be Danil’s girlfriend and not the woman he bought at an auction. Danil leans closer and whispers in my ear, “They all think I’m giving you an order to act like my girlfriend.” The heat of his breath tickles my ear, sending spine-tingling waves of pleasure through my body. “But really I just want to tell you how badly I wish I could fuck you right now.” His tongue runs over my earlobe before he gives it a soft suck.

I whisper a “Yes, please,” that has him smiling against my skin and letting out a soft laugh.

“Soon, *sladkaya*, and then you can come all over my cock again like the good girl you are.”

His fingers are already pressing against my inner wrist, and when he feels my heart speed up, he lets out another soft laugh. “I love how fucking hungry you always are for me.”

He runs his tongue up my neck before kissing my cheek. I pull back and fill myself up with the heated look he’s giving me, savoring this private moment before we’re forced to turn our attention back to the others when Vitaly walks over and everyone starts congratulating him.

Vitaly smiles and I can tell how damn proud he is at the turnout tonight. Looking down onto the first floor, I can see how packed the place has become, and there’s no doubt that he’s easily tripled this club’s income. I can imagine the dive this club must’ve been with sleazy Oleg in charge.

Danil runs his hand up my ankle and calf, dancing his fingers across my knee before trailing up my thigh. He dips his fingers just under my dress before sliding all the way back down to my ankle again. I cup his face and kiss his cheek, reveling in my freedom to do so. I hope Oleg and his brothers stay here all damn night.

“You’re driving me crazy,” I whisper against his stubbled cheek.

“Good,” he whispers back and slides his fingers under my dress again.

He keeps teasing me with soft strokes and featherlight touches until I’m squirming in his lap and my heart is racing beneath the thumb that’s still pressed to my inner wrist. Danil is like a drug. He’s in my system, in every single part of me, and if I go too long without him, I feel like I can’t breathe. It’s probably not healthy to need and want him this badly, but I’m powerless to stop it. Looking into his familiar grey eyes, I know that even if I could stop it, I wouldn’t want to.

We spend the next couple of hours at the club. Eventually, the congressmen come back with big smiles on their faces and nothing but praise for their new favorite club. Oleg and his brothers stick around, so I don’t have to pretend to be his docile pet in front of everyone. I still keep quiet because if I act too happy it’s just going to be suspicious, but at least I can smile at him now and relax a little bit. We end up ordering supper, and when the plates of food arrive, I try to scoot off Danil’s lap, but he holds me tight, keeping me right where he wants me. I laugh when he insists on feeding me the steak. The second the juicy, tender meat hits my tongue, I let out a soft moan. It’s damn good. I’ve never been served food before by a woman with sparkly pasties, but first time for everything, I guess.

“You know I can feed myself, right?” I tell him when he cuts off another piece for me.

The corner of his mouth lifts as he gives me that sexy smirk of his. “Where’s the fun in that? I like to take care of you.” He holds the piece of steak to my lips. “So let me take care of you, *sladkaya*.”

I wrap my lips around the fork and let him feed me. He smiles at my obedience, and a warmth floods me at seeing it. Yeah, I’ve got it fucking bad.

He feeds me until my plate is empty and he’s satisfied I’ve had enough, and only then does he take a bite for himself. Chris and David have been watching us, and I know they can’t understand the kindness Danil is showing me, and a part of me hopes that maybe they’ll realize you don’t have to treat women like shit or like objects whose sole purpose in life is to be fucked by them. In their eyes, Danil bought me and he can do whatever the hell he wants with me, so for them to see that he’s actually choosing to be kind, well, I can tell it confuses the fuck out of them.

I look over at Danil's brothers. Vitaly's gone back to mingling with people downstairs, Matvey's looking miserable and more than ready to get the fuck away from everyone, Lev is laughing at something Chris's just said, but I can see the tension in his face, and I'm guessing he just really wants to punch the guy, and Roman is sending a quick text to Emily. He's been glancing at his phone all night, and I know he's eager to get back to her, so I'm not surprised when he says something to Matvey in Russian before they both scoot their chairs back.

"We need to get going," Roman says in English, "but I'm sure we'll see you again soon."

"I'm sure you will," David says with a laugh. He runs his hands over the woman in his lap while she smiles and rocks her hips. "I think I'm going to be a regular guest here."

"Me too," Chris says, waving over a young brunette who looks like she probably turned eighteen last week. "Tell my daughter to call me."

Roman's face hardens and his tone isn't nearly as friendly when he says, "I will not. She'll call if she wants to talk to you."

Chris laughs and pulls the brunette into his lap. "My son-in-law has such a temper," he tells her before pawing at her tits like a goddamn buffoon.

Roman ignores him and says something to Danil and Lev in Russian. Danil answers him and then whispers in my ear, "We'll leave soon, baby. I promise."

I nod and kiss his cheek, eager to get back home with him. After Roman and Matvey walk away, Danil starts talking to David again while I tap out a tune on his thigh. I can hear it in my head, the notes crystal clear, just like they sound on that gorgeous piano he bought for me. Smiling, I rest my head on his shoulder and lose myself in his scent and the song I'm secretly composing in my head.

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Chapter 13

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Danil

I force myself to endure another hour of this shit before I finally glance over to Lev and raise a brow at him. He quickly gives me a nod, letting me know he's more than ready to leave. Simona's been still in my lap except for her fingers hidden beneath the table. She's been playing something on my thigh over and over again, slowly adding onto it. At first it was twenty-three notes long, but she's up to fifty-two now. My girl's been busy. I knew the first second I saw her that there was a brilliant mind behind those gorgeous blue eyes. She never ceases to amaze me.

"Time to go, *sladkaya*," I tell her, kissing her cheek and helping her to stand before I do the same.

"Don't forget to let me know about the next fight," David tells Lev.

"It won't be long," Lev says with a small laugh. "I usually go a couple of times a week."

Oleg takes his hand off one of the women he's been groping all night and gives me a wave. I know what he's going to say before he's even opened his stupid little mouth.

"I'll call you soon, Danil."

Simona squeezes my hand, reminding me that I can't kill him just yet, so I give him a nod instead, not trusting myself to actually speak. We make our way through the packed club, and I feel a surge of pride for my brother. He's worked his ass off to make this a success, and he's done an amazing job. What the Barinov brothers don't realize is that they've actually already signed the club over to us. Oleg will sign any damn thing I give him. The stupid fucker doesn't even take the time to read the documents. He just signs his name and smiles at me like he's the god of his kingdom and I'm

his best pal who's come along for the ride. It's fucking pathetic, but it works in our favor because last night he signed the club over to us, relinquishing all rights to it, including all the money that's coming in. He sold it to us for one dollar, which I quickly and discreetly transferred to his bank account, making it official. I smile every time I think about it.

"What are you smiling about?" Simona asks, looking up at me on our way past the bar that Mila's still working her ass off behind.

I tell her, and she laughs and tightens the arm that's wrapped around my waist. "He's going to cry when you tell him."

"Maybe I'll spare him that tidbit, let the man die in peace."

"He walks around like he's king of the fucking world. When he walked up with those two women, it took everything I had to keep a straight face."

"He's been like that since the first night we met him."

"I can see why you don't want to take his calls."

I laugh and kiss her head while we wait for Vitaly to walk over so we can tell him we're leaving. He's talking to a group of men, but as soon as he sees us, he starts to make his way over.

"You guys leaving?" he asks.

"Yeah, I've had about all I can take, but the place looks good, brother. They fucking love it here, and they're already making plans to come back."

He grins at me and smacks my shoulder. "It did turn out pretty fucking good," he says with a laugh.

Simona gives him a quick hug. "Supper was delicious, Vitaly, and I don't know much about strip clubs, but I can tell this is going to be a huge success."

He smiles and kisses the top of her head. "Thanks, Simona. I sent you a message earlier, by the way. Check your phone when you can."

I can tell she's not sure what he means, but before she can ask him, he's saying bye to Lev and then walking back into the crowd. Pulling her close to me, we weave our way through the men and women, and when I catch sight of Galina, she immediately looks to Simona and then drops her gaze. Good. As far as I'm concerned she better not ever dare to raise her eyes to Simona. I won't tolerate her speaking to her like that again. She's lucky I didn't immediately fire her ass.

We step outside, and I'm not surprised to see that there's still a line to get in. This place will be packed until closing. The men we have on duty are

making sure to frisk everyone who comes in, and Lev and I give them a nod when we pass by.

“I can’t believe they’re going to be coming to my fights,” Lev says when we get into the SUV.

“Sorry, brother,” I tell him. I know how much the fighting means to him. It’s his escape from all this, and now every time he fights, they’ll be there, tainting his fucking happy place.

“And they’ll be making money off me, which is even worse.”

“You could always lose,” I tell him.

He shoots me a look that makes me smile. “That’ll be the fucking day.”

Simona gets in the back, motioning for me to ride up front with Lev. I kiss her hand before getting in. She’s so fucking beautiful, and she’s put up with so much for us. I know it’s not easy for her to continue to be around these men, but she does it anyway, and more than that, she does it willingly and with a good attitude. She’s not bitching or trying to make us feel bad. She genuinely wants to help us find Alina, and she’s willing to make sacrifices to see it happen. The woman is fucking amazing, and I know how damn lucky I am to have her.

Her face lights up when she checks her phone and sees what Vitaly’s texted her. She holds it up, but I already know what it is. He’s sent her a text, including her in a big group chat that we’re all in. She’s now officially a part of the Melnikov family group chat, and she can’t stop smiling.

“We’re being followed,” Lev says, cutting into my thoughts and immediately making my blood turn to ice. I look in the rearview mirror, but it’s busy tonight, and there are several cars behind us.

“Which one?” I ask.

“Black BMW, two cars back.”

We’ve been speaking Russian, so Simona doesn’t know what’s going on, but somehow she can read me like a fucking book, so I’m not surprised when she asks, “What’s going on?”

I look back and smile at her. “Nothing to worry about, *sladkaya*.”

“There’s a park up ahead,” Lev says in Russian. “It’ll be empty this late at night.”

“Perfect,” I tell him. Grabbing my phone, I call Timofey and tell him to get some men and then give him the address of the park we’re headed to. When I hang up, Simona leans closer and rests her hand on my shoulder.

“Please tell me what it is.”

“Someone’s following us, but you’re safe. We have men on the way, and the SUV is bulletproof. No one’s going to hurt you.”

I can see the fear in her eyes, but she gives me a nod and squeezes my shoulder, trying like hell to be brave for me. I wish I could tell her this is the last time something like this will happen, but I can’t lie to her. My brothers and I do dangerous things. Violence is a daily part of our lives, and there’s no way to avoid it coming closer than we’d like it to at times. I fucking hate it, but I’m also a selfish bastard who’s completely in love, so I can’t let her go. All I can do is make sure she’s always protected. If anyone wants to harm her, they’ll have to go through our entire fucking Bratva.

“What are we doing?” she asks when Lev turns onto the side road that leads to the park. It’s well after midnight, and the place is deserted.

“Meeting them on our own terms,” I tell her and then send a quick message to Roman and Matvey. When I’m done, I turn back to her. She scoots closer, and when I cup her face, I see the terror in her blue eyes, and it fucking kills me.

“You are not to leave this vehicle for any reason, baby. Do you understand me?”

“Wait, what? Where are you going?”

“We’re going to see what the fuck they want.”

“Danil, you can’t.” She clutches at my arms, begging me with her eyes. “Stay in here with me. You said it’s bulletproof.”

I don’t know how to explain to her that my pride would never allow that. I’d rather go out there and get shot than cower in here like a goddamn pussy. I’ve never backed down from a fight, and I’m not about to start now.

“I love you, baby, but I can’t do that.”

Her eyes well up, but she bites her bottom lip and fights it. “I love you,” she whispers, her voice shaky and filled with worry and fear, but it’s not for her own safety. She’s worried about me, scared for *me*, and it breaks my heart to see it.

“Promise me you’ll stay in here no matter what,” I tell her.

She nods.

“I need to hear you say it, *sladkaya*.”

“I promise,” she whispers.

I kiss her, surrounding myself with the taste and feel of her, and as soon as I feel the SUV stop, I pull back and let her go, and it’s the hardest fucking thing I’ve ever done in my life.

“Let’s go,” I tell him in Russian, grabbing my gun right as he grabs his. “I love you, baby. Lock the doors behind us. Drive away if it comes to that.” I hold her gaze one last time before shutting the door on her beautiful, worried face.

Pointing my gun at the car that’s pulled up behind us, Lev does the same from the other direction. The windows are dark, and I can’t see inside, but I’m guessing it’s bulletproof just like ours. When the driver’s side door opens, I can’t say I’m completely surprised to see Dominic step out, aiming a gun at my head while three other men get out, each of them armed.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Dominic?” I ask him, keeping my gun trained right on his head. We might all die tonight, but I’m taking this fucker with me if it’s the last goddamn thing I do.

“I want the girl,” he says.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I say, letting out a harsh laugh. “Are you this big of a sore loser? That’s fucking pathetic, man.”

He grits his teeth and takes a step forward.

“That’s far enough,” Lev says.

“You’re outnumbered,” Dominic says, and I can’t help but notice that his voice isn’t shaking and neither is the hand that’s holding the gun that’s currently still pointing directly at my head. He may be a prick, but he’s used to violence, just like we are.

“You think so?” I ask with a smile.

Dominic’s eyes dart around, but beyond the small circle of light our headlights are putting out, there’s just a thick curtain of darkness. Anyone could be out there, and I can tell he’s debating on the likelihood that we’re alone.

“You think we didn’t call for backup when we noticed you tailing us?” I ask.

“Just let her go,” he says.

I tilt my head at him, trying to figure him out. “Why the fuck do you want her so badly?”

Instead of answering me, he takes another step closer. “You may have called some people, but they’re not here yet. If they were, I’d be dead right now.”

He’s not wrong, so I don’t say anything.

“You’ll have to kill us to get to her, and even then you won’t be able to. The SUV’s bulletproof, and she has the keys. She’ll drive away and my

other brothers will protect her. You'll never get your fucking hands on her."

"I have no problem killing you, you sick piece of shit," he yells at me, and I can see the hatred in his eyes. He's about to pull the trigger, and so am I. His men have their guns trained on me, so even if Dominic's unable to get off a shot before I shoot him in the head, I'm still going to get hit. A sense of dread washes over me. I was so close, so fucking close to having everything. I fill my head with thoughts of Simona, because she's the last thing I want to think about. I picture her beautiful face, the sweet look she gets in her eyes when she looks at me, the way she moans my name when she's about to come, and then I have just enough time to wonder if she's pregnant, to imagine our baby, the one I'll never get to see, but then I hear a voice that freezes me with ice-cold dread.

"No!" Simona screams running out of the SUV. "Don't shoot him! Stop!"

"Fuck!" I yell, turning around and flinging my body in front of hers, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her to the ground as I cover her with my body while gunshots go off around us. I cup her head, keeping her pulled tightly against me.

"Lev!" I yell, angling around so I can aim my gun and offer him some backup.

"I'm fine," he yells back, and then I see our men coming forward out of the darkness, guns trained on Dominic and his men. There's no need, though. His three men are on the ground and not moving, and Dominic is leaning against his car, gripping the shoulder that's been shot.

Simona's crying beneath me, whispering that she's sorry, every part of her body shaking. I hug her tighter and kiss her.

"It's okay, baby. It's all over."

I help her up, but she keeps a death grip on me as we walk over to Lev. Dominic's pale and gritting his teeth in pain, but other than that, you'd never know he'd just been shot. He looks between me and Simona, confusion written all over his face when he sees how I'm holding her and stroking her hair, comforting her while she clings to me.

"I don't understand," he finally says. "I thought you were hurting her."

"Why do you want her so badly?" I ask, not appeasing his curiosity.

While he debates whether or not he should talk, Roman and Matvey come speeding down the road. The black Camaro comes to a sharp stop right before they jump out with guns in hand.

“Everything okay?” Roman asks in Russian.

“What the fuck happened?” Matvey asks, eyeing the dead men and a very bloody Dominic.

Lev tells them in Russian what happened while I ask Dominic again, “Why do you want her?”

“She’s American,” he finally says. “She’s the only one who spoke English.”

“And that matters why?” I ask, growing more impatient with each passing second.

“Because I thought she could help me. I buy the girls that speak English, so I can ask them questions. I’ve tried translators, but they’re so fucking scared when they come over, and that just seems to freak them out more. It’s just easier if they speak English. Emil lets me know which ones to bid on. He thinks it’s just some fucked-up kink I have.”

“We heard the women you buy disappear when you’re done with them,” I tell him.

Dominic lets out a soft, humorless laugh. “That’s because I let them go. I give them money and set them free.”

“Why would you do that?” Lev asks.

“Because I’m trying to figure out who’s behind all this shit.” He sighs and puts more pressure on his arm. He’s losing a lot of blood. I can see the puddle forming on the ground, and he’s probably going to pass out soon. He knows it, so he says, “Because they killed my sister.”

It’s the last thing I’m expecting him to say, and I think we’re all stunned by it, because no one speaks for several seconds.

“Explain,” I say, breaking the silence.

“She was traveling with friends around Italy last summer. She was taken, stolen right from her fucking hotel room, and then she was sold to a sadistic fucker who beat her to death.”

I can hear the pain in his words, the rage that’s right below the surface. We all recognize it. We’re all familiar with it, and when I look over at Matvey, the look in his eyes is one that will haunt me.

“That’s not what happened to Alina,” I tell him in Russian. “Look at me, Matvey.”

It takes him several seconds before he finally meets my eyes. He’s barely hanging on. I can see it. We all can see it, and something tells me that if he breaks now, we’ll never get him back.

“That’s not what happened to Alina,” I repeat.

“How do you know?” His voice is raw with emotion, and it’s painful to hear.

“Because I fucking do. I’ve been researching this shit for over a year. I’ve talked and made friends with the men who buy these women, and what happened to his sister isn’t common. They spend a lot of money on buying these women. Most aren’t going to just throw that away.”

Switching to English, I ask Dominic, “Was your sister a virgin?”

“What the fuck business is it of yours if she was a virgin? You think she brought this on herself?” he yells. “Fuck you!”

I hate to say it, but I’m beginning to like this guy. When he’s done yelling, I say, “Because they sort them based on whether or not they’re virgins, and, no, I don’t think she brought this on herself.”

He studies me for a second, and when he chooses to believe me, he says, “She had a boyfriend. They’d been together for years. She wasn’t a virgin.”

I look over at Matvey and say in Russian, “See? It’s a different situation. It’s not what happened to Alina.” Turning so I can see Roman, I meet his eyes. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he says, but I can tell that what Dominic’s just said is fucking with his mind too.

“What the hell is going on?” Dominic asks. “Why did she run out here to save you? I saw her at that party. You fucking strangled her, and she was acting like she was scared to death of you.”

“We had to do that,” Simona says, answering before I can. “We needed to get into Tom’s office, so I came up with the idea to cause a scene so Danil would have an excuse to leave the room with me.” Her hand goes to the faded bruises on her neck. “I told him to do this to me. We had to make it believable.” She pauses and then adds, “I’m sorry about your sister.”

“Thank you,” Dominic says before looking back at me. “So you like to buy women, but you’re nice to them?” He gives another harsh laugh. “I don’t understand what the fuck is going on here.”

“They took my sister, too,” Roman says. “We’re trying to find her. We’ve been making connections with them, gathering information, and trying to find out who bought her so we can get her back.”

“And when we do have her back,” Matvey says, “we’re killing every fucking one of them.”

“Do you know who bought your sister?” I ask him.

“No. Her body was found floating in the North Sea. There was no way to tell where it had come from, if she’d been thrown off a boat, or just pulled out with the tide. She was beaten so badly, she was unrecognizable,” he says, nearly choking on his words. “The only clue I had was that goddamn black viper tattoo.”

“You said you’re friends with Emil?” Roman asks.

“I’ve spent a lot of money and time into tracking this organization, and it lead me to the group in Romania. It took me forever to gain Emil’s trust, but one night we were talking, and I told him I was very interested in acquiring a few women, but that I wanted them to come from Europe but speak English. For a nice fee, he gives me a heads-up on who to bid on when there’s an auction. So far none of them have been able to help me, though. No one seems to know who’s running this fucked-up show.”

“Do you believe him?” I ask my brothers, switching back to Russian.

“I do,” Lev says.

“Me, too,” Roman adds.

Matvey nods his head, and I agree with them. No way in fuck is Dominic making all this up.

“Why did you say you would’ve hurt me worse?” Simona asks. She’s still clutching me tightly, and I’m not about to let her go, but she’s not shaking like she was, and her voice is steady. “At the party that night, why did you say that?”

“Did you doubt for one second that I was a monster who likes to buy women?”

“No,” she admits.

“That’s why I did it. I can’t have them suspecting anything. If you’d been alone, I wouldn’t have said it. I’m sorry if it scared you, though.”

“It didn’t scare me. I knew Danil would never let you hurt me,” she says, and pride blooms in my chest. I kiss her head and bring my hand to the nape of her neck, caressing her soft skin.

“You’re about to bleed out,” Lev tells Dominic.

“I’m fine. You shot three of my men,” he says, looking over his shoulder at their dead bodies and our men who are still standing around, waiting for orders. “They were good men.”

“Then you shouldn’t have brought them here and pointed your fucking guns at us and threatened my woman,” I tell him, making it clear that I

don’t give a flying fuck who’s lying on the ground dead right now.

His lips curl up in a small grin. “I’m glad you’re not the monster I thought you were, but you’re still a fucking monster.”

There’s no point in denying it, so I don’t waste my time. Instead I tell him, “We know who’s behind all this, and we’re willing to share the information we have, but first you need to see a fucking doctor.”

“You know who they are?” he asks, desperate hope clinging to every word.

“We do,” Roman says, waving two of our men over. He tells them in Russian to take care of the bodies, and then switches to English to ask Dominic, “Do you have a doctor on your payroll?”

“Yeah. He’s in my contacts. My cell’s in the front pocket of my suit.”

Roman reaches in for his phone and then finds the number. Before he places the call, he looks at Dominic. “Are we going to work together on this, or do we need to finish you off right here and now?”

“I want these fuckers,” Dominic tells him. “I want the name of the bastard who killed my sister. I’m not going to hold a grudge about the men you killed tonight. No one will know you shot them. I’ll make up some story to the others. There won’t be any trouble between our families because of me. I’m willing to set everything aside to work together on this.”

Roman nods, understanding Dominic’s pain and trusting that the man will keep his word. He calls the doctor and hands the phone to Dominic who starts speaking rapid Italian. As soon as he’s done, he hangs up and says, “Thanks. He’s going to meet me at one of our safe houses.”

“Our men will drive you,” Roman says, pointing at the two closest men and then telling them in Russian to drive Dominic where he tells them. Before Dominic puts his phone away, Roman grabs it and adds his number to his contacts. “Call me when you’re well enough to work, and we’ll meet with you to exchange information and work on a plan.”

“I will,” Dominic says, pocketing the phone and then using the last of his strength to get in the passenger seat while two of our men join him and two others run off to follow in their own car.

We watch them drive off before Lev runs a hand through his hair and sighs. “Jesus Christ, Simona, if you ever run out of a bulletproof SUV again, I’ll join Danil in spanking your ass red.”

“Like hell you will,” I say, making him smile.

“I couldn’t just sit in there while you two died,” she says, looking up at me. “I couldn’t do it.”

“We’ll talk about it later, baby,” I tell her, kissing her forehead. “I just want to get you home right now.”

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Roman says while quickly texting Emily on the way to Matvey’s Camaro. “Emily about had a heart attack when I jumped out of bed to come here.”

“Sorry, man,” I tell him, because the last thing any of us wants to do is terrify a pregnant woman.

He waves off my apology. “I would’ve been pissed beyond belief if you hadn’t texted me.”

“I know,” I say with a laugh. Roman’s always been protective of all of us. He’s the oldest by a few months, and he takes the role of older brother very seriously. He has ever since we were kids.

We all pile back into our cars, leaving our men to dispose of the bodies and clean up the mess. We’re far enough from the main road to not be drawing attention, but cops usually swing through this park at least once or twice a night, so we need to get our asses out of here.

This time I sit in the back with Simona, holding her and knowing exactly how damn lucky we got tonight. Things could’ve easily gone another way, and it makes me more determined than ever to make what we have official and to appreciate every damn second I have with her, but first she needs to learn something. When I tell her to keep her ass in the car, she better goddamn well keep her perfect ass in the car.

By the time we get to the penthouse, Matvey and Roman are already inside, and I’ve just finished texting Vitaly and filling him in on everything that happened. He’s still at the club, but one of our men will be bringing him back once he’s able to sneak away. He said the place is still packed with a line out front, so it’ll probably be a few hours before he can leave.

The ride in the elevator is a quiet one. My arm is still wrapped tightly around Simona, and she knows I’m pissed that she didn’t listen to me, but that doesn’t change how much I fucking love her. As soon as the doors open, I lead Simona down to our room while Lev goes off to his with a soft laugh and a wave to the woman who’s starting to look a little bit nervous.

“He wasn’t serious about a spanking, was he?” she asks, looking up at me while I guide her down the stairs.

“He wasn’t serious about helping me with it,” I tell her, and when I walk past our bedroom, her body tenses and she stops walking. I laugh and pick her up, carrying her to the room that’s soundproof.

“Why aren’t we going to bed?”

“Because we need a room that you can scream in, *sladkaya*.”

“Danil,” she starts, but I cut her off by cupping her face and leaning down so my face is the only thing she sees.

“You disobeyed me, sweetheart, and you put your life in danger as well as my brother’s.” I kiss the tip of her cute nose. “And now you’re going to take your punishment like a good girl.”

Her blue eyes are filled with so many things—curiosity, fear, excitement, embarrassment, and underneath all that is a dark lust simmering right below the surface. I set her down and trace the line of her jaw with my thumb.

“Take off my belt, *sladkaya*.”

Her eyes widen as she sucks in a quick breath.

“Are you seriously going to spank me with your belt?”

“That’s not all I’m going to do. Now stop talking and take off my fucking belt or I’m going to have to gag you with my tie as well.”

She hesitates for just a second, but when she sees how serious I am, she reaches out with shaky hands and starts to unbuckle my belt. I’m already so fucking hard I’m straining against my pants. Her eyes run over the hard length of me as she pulls my belt free. I watch her and unbutton my suit jacket before tossing it onto the piano bench. Her eyes follow my fingers as I undo my cuffs and roll up my sleeves.

I take the belt from her, wrapping the leather around my hand before making a fist and letting the rest of it hang down, taunting her with the sight of it. I know she’s imagining how it’s going to feel smacking the perfect skin of her ass.

“Turn around and bend over the piano.”

She turns around, bracing her hands on the grand piano, but it’s not enough. I press against her back, guiding her further down until her upper body is resting on the black, polished wood and her ass is bent over right where I want it. Keeping the belt wrapped around my hand, I step closer and run my hands up her thighs, slowly pulling her dress up, revealing her round ass one delicious inch at a time. I run my fingers along the lace of her garter belt.

“When I saw you in this before we left, all I could think about was how badly I wanted to fuck you hard enough to tear holes in all this beautiful lace.”

“Do it,” she moans. “That can be my punishment.”

I laugh and squeeze her ass, digging my fingers in and groaning at the indentations I’m making in her soft flesh.

“I’m definitely going to be fucking you hard, baby, but that’s not your punishment.” I lean down and run my tongue along one of her ass cheeks. She moans and arches up for me, and when I give her a soft bite, she whimpers while I smile. She’s going to hate what’s coming, but she needs this. The next time she thinks about disobeying me and putting herself in danger, I want her to remember what I’m about to do to her.

I bring my face to hers, kissing a line along her cheek before grazing her ear with my teeth. “You’re not allowed to come tonight, sweetheart. I’m going to spank your ass, and I’m going to fuck you so hard you’ll be sore for days, but I’m not letting you come.”

Her sad whimper makes me laugh as I stand back up and grip the belt tighter.

“Ready, baby?”

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Chapter 14

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Simona

"What? No, hell no, I'm not ready," I say, trying to see him over my shoulder, but he's put one of his hands on my back, holding me in place. My breasts are crushed against the piano, my feet hurt in these goddamn heels, and I'm squirming because I know he's going to be smacking my ass any second now. It's not all from fear, though. A part of me is dying for this, excited for it, and I'm not sure what to make of that. There's something so freeing about giving myself completely to him, and the truth is I love it when he dominates me. I fucking love that I'm bent over and he's so hard he can barely stand it.

He drags the leather belt along my ass, teasing me with it, letting me know that he's in charge. When the first smack comes, I scream from surprise and from the shock of how fucking painful it is.

"That's one, sweetheart. You're getting ten."

"Danil, no," I plead, but he's already giving me spanking number two.

"The next time I tell you to stay put, are you going to?"

He doesn't wait for an answer, just gives me number three, and I swear it's harder than the other two, which just pisses me off.

"No," I yell at him, smacking my clenched fist against my beautiful piano. "I'm going to run out every damn time if it means it might keep you safe."

He leans closer, and I can hear the anger in his voice when he says, "Wrong fucking answer," before giving me two more smacks with the belt.

I hiss and squirm as tears fall down my face. By the time he gets to eight, I'm openly sobbing. I hear the belt drop to the floor before he runs his hand over my stinging cheeks. The soft, featherlight touches are at such

odds with the sting from his belt, and my body immediately leans into the gentle touch. My hips rock, craving the feel of him.

“I thought I was going to die tonight,” he admits. His voice is low, his accent thick, and I can hear the pain behind the words. “The one thing that gave me peace was knowing that at least you’d be safe.”

“But I couldn’t just sit back and watch you die,” I sob. “How could I do that?”

His hand slides around my hip before splaying out on my lower stomach. “And if you’re pregnant, *sladkaya*? Did you think about that? Because that’s all I was fucking thinking about.”

He’s right. It hadn’t even occurred to me that I might be pregnant, but if I am, and if I’d been shot, god, I can’t even finish the thought. Sorrow rolls through me, making me sob even harder.

“Everything I do is for a reason,” he whispers against my skin. “I need you to trust me enough to do what I tell you to do. If I tell you to stay, I need to know you’re going to fucking stay.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

He kisses my cheek and then smacks my ass hard with his hand. “I know you are, baby,” he says, and then gives me the tenth spank, this one hard enough to make my knees buckle. The hand that’s still splayed across my stomach is the only thing keeping me from collapsing.

I hear a rustle of fabric and then the sound of his zipper being pulled down. His hands run over my sore ass before I hear what sounds exactly like a knife being flicked open. My body freezes at the sound.

“Don’t move,” he warns right before I feel the cool touch of the blade against my skin. He very slowly drags it along my lower back before sliding it beneath the thong I’m wearing and without any effort on his part, the sharp blade cuts through the lace. I shudder at how fucking sharp that knife is as he drags it along one of my stinging cheeks before setting it down on the piano next to me.

“Fuck,” I whisper when I see the deadly-looking serrated blade.

He frees me of the thong, leaving me in just the garter belt and thigh highs, and when his knee nudges my legs further apart, I widen my stance for him. A ragged moan slips out of me when he slides his thick cock between my legs, running it along my pussy.

“Sweetheart,” he says with a wicked laugh. “You’re fucking drenched.”

I don’t even bother trying to deny it. The proof is all over his dick.

“This is going to be such torture for you,” he groans, grabbing onto my dress and slowly pulling it off my body. His hands run over my back, unhooking my bra so I can toss it aside. My bare breasts press against the piano, and it feels so fucking good to lay here bent over with my ass on fire and Danil’s thick cock slowly sliding along my sensitive folds. I know he said I couldn’t come, but there’s no way in hell he can stop me. I’m already close, and when I start to rock my hips so I can grind against him, he lets out a soft laugh, but he doesn’t stop me.

I’m feeling pretty damn good about things as I work my body, bringing myself closer and closer to the edge, but Danil takes it all away when I’m seconds from my release and he pulls back, breaking contact and leaving me with nothing but a painful ache between my legs.

“No!” I yell, smacking my hand against the polished wood. “Danil, please!”

“I told you that you couldn’t come, baby.”

“I didn’t think you were serious,” I whine.

“Oh, I’m fucking serious.” He grabs my hip with one hand and cups my pussy with the other. “This is my cunt, sweetheart, and you don’t get to come without my permission, and you don’t fucking have it tonight. I’m going to kill every goddamn orgasm you try to have, and if you do accidentally come, *sladkaya*, I will spank your fucking ass raw. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I whisper, feeling my arousal drip down my inner thighs, fully aware of how difficult this is going to be, far more painful than the spanking had been.

“Yes, what?” He asks before dragging his tongue along my spine while the pad of one finger rims my swollen, achy clit.

“Yes, sir,” I say. My whole body shakes with the need to come, and he isn’t even inside me yet. It’ll be a fucking miracle if I can manage this.

“Good girl,” he praises. He moves his hand, replacing it with the thick head of his cock, and as he slowly slides into me, I clutch at the piano and beg for mercy.

“I can’t, Danil,” I whimper. “I’m going to fucking come. I know I will. I can’t help it.” In a fit of panic, I scream, “I don’t want to disobey you,” and I’m surprised by how true it is. I don’t want to go against what he’s said, but I know my body, and there’s no way in fuck I can stop it from coming.

He slides in the rest of the way, pulling a deep groan from me, the tension already building deep in my core, threatening to consume me with each passing second that he's inside me.

"You're already close, aren't you?" he murmurs against the nape of my neck. "I can feel your greedy little cunt pulsing and clenching around me so fucking tightly while you try so hard to be my good girl and obey."

"I'm trying," I whisper.

He gives the crook of my neck a soft bite and then starts to fuck me hard. I'm not prepared for it, and all I can do is clutch at the smooth wood of the piano and try like hell to not explode into a million pieces. It's happening, though, and there's not a goddamn thing I can do to stop it. I try to breathe through it, try to close my goddamn legs, but he just fucks me harder and growls a warning against my skin. I've resigned myself to the fact that I'm not going to be able to sit down for a week. Each hard thrust pushes me closer and closer to the point of no return, and right when I feel the orgasm start, feel the first inklings of warm bliss spread through me, he reaches his hand around and smacks my clit hard enough to make my vision darken.

The ragged scream I give is part pain and part utter, heartbreaking sorrow at having my orgasm taken from me.

"My naughty *sladkaya*," he growls against my neck. "You just can't help it. Your greedy little cunt wants to come around my cock so fucking badly."

"Yes," I cry. "Please."

When he gives me another thrust, I'm still so close to the damn edge that he's forced to give my clit another sharp smack to kill it. He gives a soft laugh.

"Looks like I won't be fucking your pussy tonight. You're more sensitive than I thought."

I let out a sigh of relief, because I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was going to be failing the *do not come* mission. He pulls out of me, and I keep waiting for him to pick me up, but instead of a pair of strong arms carrying me to bed, I get a wet finger pressing against my asshole.

"What the hell?" I say, trying to twist around.

"Easy, baby," he murmurs, circling the pad of his finger along the place I'd always thought of as forbidden. "I promised you a good hard fuck, and

you’re going to get it. You’re too much of a naughty little slut to not come, so it looks like I’ll be fucking your sweet ass instead.”

Even though there’s no denying how good his finger feels caressing all those nerve endings I’ve been completely ignorant of, I still tell him the truth.

“I’m scared, Danil.”

He immediately stops and pulls back before turning me around. He picks me up and sits me on the piano, smiling when I wince at how sore my ass is. Cupping my face, his grey eyes look into mine.

“I would never hurt you, *sladkaya*.”

I lift a brow at him because my ass cheeks are screaming a different story.

“That was different, and you know it. I spanked you, and, yes, it hurt, but you loved every second of that punishment, and we both know it.”

He sees the truth in my eyes and gives me a wink. “Are you scared because you think it’ll hurt?”

“Yes.”

He gives me a quick kiss. “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

His cock is still rock hard and jutting out from his unzipped pants when he walks out of the room, leaving me alone and naked and sitting on the magnificent gift he bought me. He’s not gone long, and when he walks back in, he’s carrying a bottle of lube. I’m thrilled to see that it’s brand new and still sealed. A half-empty bottle would’ve made me think all kinds of things that I don’t want to fucking think right now.

“We’re going to use a lot of this,” he says, holding up the bottle, “and I’m going to prep you, and we’re going to take it very slow.” He hooks a finger under my chin, turning me to look at him. “I will stop the second you ask me to.”

I nod and whisper, “I know you will.”

“Are you willing to try?”

I nod again, because I want to do this. I’m curious about it, especially after how good just having his finger caress me had felt, and I want to share everything with him, give every part of myself to him.

“We also need to get you out of that beautiful head of yours.”

Before I can ask what he means, he picks me up and carries me around the piano. Lowering me onto my knees on the piano bench so I’m facing the keys, he says, “Play me that song you’ve been composing all night.”

“What?”

“The song you’ve been writing. Please play it for me.”

“How the hell did you know I was writing a song?”

He smiles and kisses my cheek. “I’m very observant. You were up to fifty-two notes by the time we left. I’d like to hear them all.”

Damn, he really does pay attention. “I have stage fright,” I tell him. “That’s why I never play in front of anyone.” I let out a soft laugh. “That’s also why I wasn’t able to finish my degree and make a career out of this.”

He kisses my neck and runs his tongue along my skin, making my breath hitch and my pussy spark right back to life.

“I’m not anyone, baby. I’m the man who’s desperately in love with you, the man who will be your husband very damn soon, and the father of our future children. Play the damn piano while I finger-fuck this sweet ass.”

“Goddamn” I groan, feeling every part of me heat up at his words.

I’d been mainly working with my right hand, so that’s the one I place on the piano while I use my left to help brace myself. While I work up the courage to play the first note, Danil runs his hands over me from behind. He cups my tits, massaging them and pinching my nipples while his cock presses against my ass.

“You’re so beautiful, baby.” The awe in his voice surprises me and makes me feel so fucking sexy. He’s the only man to ever make me feel this way. His hands drift lower, running over my sides and stomach before his fingers lightly graze my pussy. It’s a gentle touch, a teasing one, and when he drags them over my clit, I moan and rock into his touch. He gives me one more rub before pulling his hand away and grabbing the bottle of lube.

“I don’t hear any music, sweetheart.”

I manage two notes, the sound of them seeming so loud and out of place while I’m naked and bent over, before I feel the wet warmth of the lube hitting my asshole and my fingers still.

“God, your tight little ass is so fucking sexy,” he growls, running his finger along my now very slippery hole. When he starts to slide in, I let out a soft gasp and clutch at the piano, forgetting all about the song I’m supposed to be playing.

“Easy, baby, just relax.” His finger presses harder against me, sliding into my tightness as my entire body quivers with need. “Play the fucking song, *sladkaya*, or I’m going to take my finger out of your ass.”

He slowly fucks me with his finger, each stroke going just a tiny bit deeper, and the pleasure is unlike anything I imagined. I'm suddenly desperate for him to not stop, to never fucking stop, so I force my fingers to start moving. It's not graceful, it's sure as fuck not beautiful, but it's the best I can do with his finger in my ass.

"Good girl, baby," he praises, sliding his finger all the way in. "Keep playing."

"Mm-hmm," I whimper, feeling him start to add a second finger.

"You're doing so good, opening up so fucking good for me."

I keep playing the melody I wrote for him while he works my ass, getting it ready for something much bigger. My hips rock with each thrust of his fingers, and when he pulls them out, I let out a pained groan at the loss of him.

"Don't worry, baby, you won't be empty for long."

He takes a second to slather his cock in lube, wanting this to be as painless as possible for me before pressing his head against my tight hole. As soon as he grips my hips and starts to press past the tight ring of muscle, my fingers slam down, filling the room with loud, discordant notes that mix with the lust-filled mewling sound he's pulling from me.

"That's my good girl," he praises. "That's my good fucking girl."

He's slow as he thrusts into me, but when I start to clench up because the sting of it becomes too much, he quickly backs off, never giving me more than I can take.

"Your ass looks fucking amazing taking my cock, *sladkaya*. My sweet girl bent over her piano, every part of her body shaking with need, goddamn," he groans. "You have no idea what you do to me."

Every thrust is slow, but each one goes a little bit deeper, and when I feel his hips hit my ass, I let out a whimper of pure bliss as he leans over me, covering my hands with his. He kisses my neck, biting and sucking the delicate skin.

"I'm going to fuck you now, baby. Try and take it like a good girl, but if it's too much, tell me, and I'll stop."

I nod my head and whisper, "Okay."

"Don't tense up," he says when he feels my body do just that. "Just relax and take what I want to give you, every goddamn inch of it."

I nod again, forcing myself to take a deep breath, and as soon as I exhale, his hips speed up. Each thrust pulls a ragged cry from my lips. It's

so fucking intense. I can't think, I can barely remember how to breathe, and the tension keeps building, but there's no release, because he still won't let me come.

"I don't hear any music, *sladkaya*. If you stop playing, I stop fucking."

In a daze, I hurry up and start playing the melody that's so permanently embedded in my brain that I don't have to think to play it. I let my fingers do what they know how to do as every other part of my body is focused on the way Danil is fucking me and shattering me into a million pieces with each perfect stroke of his cock.

His mouth never leaves my skin. His lips, tongue, and teeth consume my shoulders and neck as he brings one hand up to cup one of my bouncing tits. He pinches my nipple hard before gently rubbing away the sting.

"Please," I beg, but he just bites my neck and fucks me harder.

Even without the orgasm, pleasure still rushes through me. It's not the same, but it's enough to soothe the ache a little bit. It's enough to give me hope that maybe I'll come like this anyway. I should've known better. Danil is a master when it comes to my body, and he knows exactly how to play me. He keeps me right on the edge, and when I try to close my thighs so I can scissor them together, anything to try and relieve the building ache between my legs, he drops my breast and grabs my thigh instead, forcing my legs to stay apart, denying me the release I so desperately need.

As if he wants to pour salt in the wound, he speeds up, thrusting into me harder before his entire body goes rigid and he growls my name while his cock pulses inside me. His own release consumes him, and I'm so fucking jealous. Pleasure makes him groan and bite the skin of my neck as he shoots his seed inside me, each pulse another shot of pure bliss for him while it's a tortured agony for me. I slam my hand against the keys, letting him know how angry I am, but all he does is give a soft laugh before another masculine groan of pleasure fills the space around us.

When he's empty, he's breathless, both of us covered in sweat, and my body is sore for so many different reasons. My emotions are all over the place, and when I start to cry, he slowly slides out of me before gently picking me up. He kisses my forehead and cheeks, whispering how much he loves me as he carries me back to our room and into the bathroom.

He holds me while he runs a bath and then gently washes me clean. Each touch from him is gentle and loving, and it makes me feel so goddamn

cherished, but when I look into his grey eyes and ask him if he'll let me come now, he just laughs and kisses the tip of my nose.

"Not yet, baby," he says, massaging the shampoo into my hair. "It wouldn't be much of a lesson if I gave in so easily."

I slump against him, trying to ignore the need that courses through every cell in my body.

"I loved the song you played, by the way."

I laugh when I think about how rough it had sounded. "I wasn't able to play it very well."

"I thought it sounded beautiful. Will you play it for me again? This time when I'm not fucking you in the ass?"

"Maybe." I give him a smile. "I'll play it for you right now if you let me come."

"Nice try, baby, but unlike you, I can be patient."

It turns out he isn't lying. He can in fact be very, very patient. He makes me wait two days. Two-motherfucking days. Every second of those forty-eight hours is pure agony. He keeps teasing me, bringing me right to the edge before denying me what I'm so desperate for. Finally, when I'm barely hanging on to my sanity, he takes pity on me and carries me to bed. He undresses me slowly, drinking in the sight of me, smiling when every touch he gives me leaves me purring with need. He's kept me on the precipice of release for too goddamn long. Every nerve ending is lit up and ready to go. I'm like parched earth—all it'll take is one strike of a match and I'm going to go up in flames.

He lays me back on the bed and kisses me slowly before whispering against my lips. "The next time I tell you to do something, are you going to do it, *sladkaya*?"

"Yes, sir," I quickly whisper, because I've learned my fucking lesson. I'll wait in the goddamn car, and I'll do what he tells me to do, but it's not because my ass is still sore from the spanking and I'm desperate to come. I would gladly endure that because the truth is that I would risk my life for his again and again. I'm not, however, willing to risk the life of the baby that I may or may not be carrying.

"I know why you're saying yes, baby," he says, reading everything on my face so easily. "But I'll take it."

"How the hell do you know what I'm thinking?"

He smiles and kisses me again while gently nudging my pussy lips apart with the head of his dick. “Because I love you, baby,” he says as he slides into me, filling me up in one smooth thrust that immediately makes me come so hard it momentarily blinds me.

“Danil!” I scream, blindly clutching at him as my body comes completely undone. All the edging he’s done to me pays off in a big fucking way, and all I can do is let the ecstasy consume me as I cling to him and shake from the force of the orgasm.

He fucks me in a fierce rhythm, giving me back all the pleasure he’s been denying me and then magnifying it by a thousand. As soon as one orgasm ends, another begins. It’s a spiral of pure, spine-tingling bliss, and by the time he growls my name and I feel his cock pulse inside me, I’m on the verge of passing out.

Cupping the back of my head, he kisses me slowly, running his tongue along mine as aftershocks turn me into a limp, panting mess.

“Holy shit,” I whisper when I’m finally able to speak.

He laughs and brushes sweaty strands of hair from my forehead. “See, not such a bad punishment after all.”

I’d agree, but my body is already shutting down as my eyes drift closed. He completely wore me out, and I’m asleep before he’s even grown fully soft inside me. The last thing I remember is Danil’s deep voice in my ear, whispering that he loves me.

When I wake, he’s sitting at his desk working. I stay where I’m at, pretending to still be asleep while I run my eyes over the chiseled jaw and sexy lines of his neck. The side of his mouth quirks up before he says, “I can feel you staring at me, *sladkaya*.”

Standing up, he walks over and leans down to kiss me. He kisses me sweetly, gently, and then trails a line of kisses to my ear before nuzzling against my neck and breathing me in. Lifting me into his arms, he whispers, “I love you so much.” He sets me down, but before I can say anything, he’s kneeling in front of me, looking more gorgeous than any man I’ve ever seen.

“What are you doing?”

He smiles up at me and gives me a wink. “I’m proposing, baby.”

“But I’m naked,” I quickly say, making him smile and give a soft laugh.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed.” He grips my hips and pulls me closer, kissing right above my pussy. He lifts his grey eyes to mine, and when he

speaks, he's so close I can feel his lips moving against my skin and the warmth of his breath.

"Ever since the first second I saw you, I knew you were mine. I can't explain it, I'll never be able to, but I knew that you were the woman I was meant to spend my life with."

He reaches into his pocket, bringing out a small, velvet box, and when he opens it, I let out a soft gasp at the gorgeous diamond inside. It's a square-cut blue diamond that's the exact same color as my eyes with sparkly white diamonds circling it and extending along the delicate band. It's stunning, the most beautiful ring I've ever seen, and when my eyes get all watery, he squeezes my hand and kisses it.

"I love you with a fierceness that scares the hell out of me," he says with a soft laugh. "It's all-consuming and it possesses every single part of me and I wouldn't have it any other way. You make me happier than I've ever been. You've shown me what love is supposed to be like, and every day I wake up so goddamn grateful to have you next to me. I love you so much, and I promise I will always love you and take care of you and be faithful to you, because you're the only woman I want, the only woman I will ever want. Will you marry me, Simona?"

I'm crying before he's even asked the question, and when I say, "Yes," it's only a shaky whisper, but he hears it, and the smile that lights up his face as he slips the gorgeous ring on my finger is one I'll never forget.

Standing, he picks me up and kisses me like he'll never be able to get enough. One hand cups my bare ass, and the other is wrapped around the nape of my neck so he can feel my pulse.

"You're the only thing that's ever made my brain feel calm," he murmurs against my lips. "Usually it never shuts up, and it drives me fucking crazy—all this noise that never goes away. But when I'm with you, it quiets down. It feels peaceful."

I cup his face and kiss him again. "I love you so much, and I know it's a fucked-up thing to say, but I'm so glad I went to Romania. I'd go through hell if it meant I'd end up right where I'm at. I'd do anything and go through anything to be with you."

"I'm just glad I found you when I did. I swear I'll keep you safe. I won't ever let any of them hurt you ever again."

"I know you won't."

I smile when he starts to carry me to the bathroom, but instead of taking me into the shower like I'm expecting, he pulls something out from one of the drawers.

"It's time, baby."

"Time for what?" I ask.

He kisses me and holds up a box, letting me see what it is. It's a pregnancy test, and the excited look on his face makes me laugh. I rest my hands on his stubbled cheeks, admiring how beautiful the ring looks on my finger before meeting his grey eyes.

"You want it to be positive?"

"More than anything in the world."

I think about a baby, *our* baby, and I can't help but smile at the image of a grey-eyed, dark-haired baby in Danil's arms. God, he's going to look sexy as hell holding our baby.

"Me too," I whisper against his lips, giving him one more kiss before he sets me down and leaves to give me some privacy.

"Don't read it without me," he says, and I promise him that I won't.

As soon as I've peed on the stick, I open the door and we wait together. He keeps his arms wrapped around me, stroking the bare skin of my back and ass, and as soon as two pink lines appear, he laughs and picks me up, kissing me until we're both breathless.

"I'm so happy, baby."

"I am too, Danil, happier than I ever thought possible."

He sets me on the counter so he can lean down and kiss my stomach. His grey eyes are dark with lust when he looks up at me.

"God, you're going to look sexy pregnant."

I laugh and run my hands through his hair while he kisses all over my stomach, whispering in Russian to our baby. I look down at my fiancé, knowing how unbelievably lucky I am. Our baby is going to be surrounded in love, and I can't wait to tell everyone our news. Danil and his brothers will keep fighting to bring Alina home, and I'll do everything I can to help. This family won't be complete until she's back again. We all know this, but I've been through enough to know that nothing is guaranteed in life, and if you find happiness, you need to embrace it with everything you have and never let it go. And that's exactly what I'm going to do.

Danil kisses me again before picking me up and carrying me to the shower. He holds me like he'll never let me go, and I clutch him just as

tightly, because there's nowhere else I'd rather be. We may have had a painful beginning, but when I look at Danil's beautiful face and the grey eyes that are filled with so much love, I know that every second of it was worth it, and I'd go through it all again in a heartbeat. I'd do anything for this man.

"I love you, *sladkaya*," he whispers against my lips.

I smile and kiss my fiancé as he presses me against the tiled wall and slides into me again.

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Epilogue

One Month Later
Simona

When Danil and I step off the elevator, the first thing that greets us is the wall of family photos, and every time I see them I grin like an idiot. Photos from our wedding mingle with Emily and Roman's, and seeing all of our smiling faces makes me so damn happy.

"You looked so beautiful," Danil says, looking at our favorite photo, the one where he's holding me bridal style while everyone smiles at the camera—everyone but me. My face is glued to my husband's, and I'm looking at him like he's my entire world. He'd looked so damn handsome in that black tux. Why would I ever want to look away?

There are other photos of me dancing with his brothers, of me and Emily with our arms wrapped around one another and huge smiles on our faces. She'd helped me pick out my wedding dress and had made sure the rooftop terrace looked amazing. We'd decided to get married in the same place she and Roman had. It just seemed right, and I'm so glad we did. Every time I walk outside, I remember that day and how happy we'd been and how happy we still are.

Turning to Danil, I cup his face and pull him closer. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?" I whisper against his lips.

He grins and pats my ass. "I wonder if it's even half as much as I love you," he says, kissing me again before I can argue and say it's more.

"Did you guys get the food or did you just make out in the elevator the whole time?" Vitaly yells at us, making me laugh while Danil groans at the

interruption. “We do have security cameras in there,” he says with a laugh. “I see everything.”

“Wait, are you being serious right now?” I ask him.

He just laughs while Emily and I shoot each other a horrified look. I look at Danil. “Is he serious? Do you have cameras in there?”

He scrubs a hand along the back of his neck and lets out a soft laugh. “We do, but he knows he’s not allowed to watch shit like that,” Danil says, looking over my head at his brother and giving him a pointed look.

“Did we agree on that?” Vitaly asks. “I’m not so sure I remember that conversation. Do you remember that?” he asks Lev.

“I do not,” Lev says with a grin. “I think we would’ve written that down.” He nods and adds, “Yeah, that definitely seems like something we would’ve written down and put on the fridge.”

“Exactly,” Vitaly says. “Right next to the movie-night rules.”

I can’t help thinking about the time Danil fucked me in the elevator last week. We’d been coming back from my OB/GYN appointment, and something had just come over us. He’d stopped the elevator, picked me up, and fucked me so hard I’d seen stars. Judging by the bright red color on Emily’s cheeks, we’re not the only couple who’s been taking advantage of the private elevator.

Roman laughs and kisses her flaming cheeks. “They’re just messing around. They know we’d kick their asses for spying like that.”

“They would try,” Lev says with a laugh.

Danil and I set the pizza boxes on the counter and he whispers in my ear, “Don’t worry, *sladkaya*. I’m the one in charge of the security cameras, baby, and I always make sure everything gets erased from the main feed.” He kisses my cheek. “No one gets to see you like that but me.”

Relieved, I start getting down plates and grabbing some drinks, ignoring the list of movie-night rules that Vitaly and Lev insisted on writing after Emily and I ganged up on them last week and made them watch a very long historical romance. Five grown men squirming and letting out heavy, pained sighs for over two hours had been a beautiful thing to see. They’d quickly come up with a list and written rule number one in all caps: NO HISTORICAL ROMANCES…EVER. I still laugh when I think about it.

Tonight it’s Matvey’s night to pick, so I’m guessing it’ll be an action-packed evening with many things being blown up. We try to do a movie night once a week, but things have been busy lately. Vitaly’s at Pink most

nights, Lev's been fighting more since David spread the word and started inviting people to watch and make bets, and they're all preparing for the upcoming meeting with Dominic. The bullet he took ended up doing quite a bit of damage and it's taken a lot longer for him to heal than he expected.

All in all, they're making progress towards finding Alina, and we can all sense how close they're getting. I know it's only a matter of time before they find her.

After we've all fixed our plates, we head for the couch. Before I can sit down, Vitaly tosses the blow-up donut cushion he'd surprised me with the morning after my spanking. It bounces off my butt and hits the floor.

"Just in case," he says with a big grin.

"I can't believe you bought me one of these," I tell him, still cringing with embarrassment at the memory of walking around with a sore ass in front of all of them.

He laughs while I sit down next to Danil. "Don't lie, it helped, didn't it?"

"It did," I say, unable to hold back the laugh. "It really fucking did."

Danil laughs and rests his hand on my thigh, giving me a soft squeeze.

"I just like to be helpful," Vitaly says. "That's what a good older brother does."

"Much appreciated," Danil says, "but she hasn't stepped in front of any guns lately, so her ass is just fine."

"Well, that's no fun," Vitaly mutters as Matvey grabs the remote and starts scrolling through all the options.

I settle back in against my husband while we eat our pizza and enjoy our family night together. When the movie turns out to have one of the worst endings imaginable, we all give Matvey hell for it. He takes the good-natured joking, and even goes so far as to give us a smile as he tells us all to fuck off, which is the closest thing to a hug any of us will get from him.

After we help clean up, Danil grabs my hand and leads me to bed. He undresses me slowly, taking his time, kissing every inch of me. It always amazes me how sweet he is. He can be dominating and give one hell of a spanking, but he's always in control and everything he does is filled with the love he has for me. I feel it in every soft caress of his fingers and in every sharp smack to my ass. Tonight, though, I'm getting the sweet treatment.

When he lays me down and I wrap my legs around him, he whispers how much he loves me against my lips as he slowly slides into me, filling me to the point of pain, just like he always does, just like I need him to.

He fucks me slowly, each excruciatingly slow thrust pulling moans and whimpers from me until my whole body is shaking. I dig my nails into his back, kissing him harder, begging him with my body to give me what I need.

"Come for me, wife," he murmurs against my lips, while he circles his hips, hitting me right where I need him to. "Show me how much you love my cock."

So I do.

I moan his name and give his tongue a hard suck as my body tenses and clings to him. He groans when he feels the way my pussy grips him, forcing him to let go with me. Pleasure races through our bodies, and when he slides his hand beneath my back so he can pull me tighter against him, I know it's because he wants to feel the beat of my heart against his chest as he comes deep inside me.

It's perfect. This life we share, the beautiful man inside me, our baby slowly growing in my belly, the love that I feel for the two of them that completely consumes me—it's perfect, and I will never take it for granted.

When he slides out of me so he can spoon me from behind, he lays a protective hand along my stomach and kisses my neck.

"I love you so much, *sladkaya*."

I turn my head and kiss him. "I love you, too."

He holds me while I fall asleep. I know he'll most likely slip out of bed to keep working, but he always holds me until I fall asleep. It's one of the many things I love about my husband. I snuggle in deeper, breathing in the scent of him and feeling completely safe and at peace. I smile when he brings his other hand to my heart so he can count the beats.

* * *

Danil

I hold Simona, counting the steady beats of her heart until I'm sure she's in a deep sleep. But even then, I can't bring myself to let her go, so I watch her

sleep until I can't put off getting out of bed any longer. Giving her neck a kiss, I whisper that I love her and then gently move away from her and force myself out of bed. I want to stay under the covers with her, feel her body against mine and fall asleep, but I can't do that. I have too much work to do.

Grabbing the jeans from the floor, I take my laptop into her music room so I won't wake her up. She's gotten over her stage fright with me, and I now have a desk in the corner so I can work in here while she plays. This has quickly become my favorite room, and not just because it always makes me think of the time I spanked and fucked her ass, although that is part of it. I love it because it's our special place. It's filled with the two of us, but it's also filled with so much of her.

A few weeks ago, I'd surprised her by having a couple of our guys go to her old apartment and pack up her belongings. I wanted her to have the things that meant something to her. She'd cried when she'd seen the boxes of photo albums. We framed a few, and my favorite is sitting on a bookcase near my desk. She's ten in the photo and smiling so damn big. Her whole face is lit up. She's standing between her kneeling parents, and she has her arms spread out to wrap around the two of them. Every time I see it, I smile. I'm so glad she had a happy childhood.

She'd asked me how I knew what her old address was, and I reminded her that she'd used Google maps to see how far away it was. She'd looked so surprised when I told her that, insisting that she'd deleted the history. God, she's fucking adorable. She honest to god thought that would hide it from me. I've hacked into some of the most secure banks around the world, and she thought hitting delete would cover her tracks. I laugh every time I think about it. She'd been just as stunned when I told her that I'd hacked in and erased her student debt.

Sitting down, I pull up the file I've been working on. Now that we have a name, I've been putting together every single thing I can find on the Lebedev Bratva. It's taking a long time because as much as I hate to admit it, these guys aren't stupid. They know how to cover their tracks, but I'm slowly gathering information, and I know that one day we'll get them.

Our appointment with Dominic is coming up, and we've both agreed to share everything we have. It's an alliance none of us had planned on, but if joining with the Italians can help us find Alina, then we're all willing to do it. We need to do something to keep moving forward. I've had to bring

Simona back to Pink a few times, and every time I do it, I hate every goddamn second of it. I bought us each a gold chain so we could wear our wedding bands around them since we can't let anyone else know we're married yet. I still hated removing the band from my finger. There was no other way around it, though. Everyone expects her to be on my arm, and we can't afford to fuck anything up when we're this close to getting answers.

After staring at my screen for a few hours, I run upstairs to grab something to drink. I've just opened a sweet tea when I hear the elevator ding. Lev walks in a few seconds later—hands bloody and a worn-out look on his face. He's been fighting more and more lately, and we're all worried about him.

"How'd it go?" I ask him, grabbing another drink and tossing it to him.

He catches it and runs a hand through his sweaty hair. "Same as usual. Beat the shit out of some fuck who thought he could fight and made some jackasses a bunch of money."

"You don't have to keep doing this, Lev. You know that, right? Just because they've taken an interest in your fights, doesn't mean you have to keep doing it."

He takes a long drink before saying, "It's the only thing that keeps me sane. I think I'd go crazy if I couldn't hit people." He gives a small laugh. "I know that sounds crazy, but it's the truth. Even before Alina was taken, I've always felt like I had something dark inside me, something that needed to come out. If I don't let it out from time to time, I think I'd fucking explode."

He gives a shrug, but I don't say anything because he's not telling me anything I don't already know. Lev's always had a rage inside him. We all know this. Hell, we've all seen it firsthand. The underground fighting has helped, though. He's calmer when he has an outlet.

"It's gotten worse since Alina was taken," he admits. "The nerve of those fuckers to just grab her like that, like they had the fucking right to touch her." He shakes his head to clear it before the anger can take over again. "She's one of ours, and those fuckers are going to pay for what they've done to her."

"They will," I agree. "They're all going to pay, and soon you'll be able to take out your anger on the people you really wish you were fighting."

"I can't fucking wait, brother." He finishes his drink and tosses it in the trash. "How's Simona's morning sickness?"

I smile at the mention of my wife. “It wasn’t as bad this morning.”

“Good.” He gives a soft laugh. “God, your baby will probably be hacking his way into banks by the time he or she is ten.”

I laugh at the image, pride welling up inside me. Lev laughs and smacks me on the back before heading to his room so he can get cleaned up. I’m still smiling about our baby when I go back downstairs and crawl into bed next to my wife. Wrapping my arms around her, I scoot her up against me again and rest one hand on her belly and the other one cups her left tit in the perfect way that allows me to feel the beat of her heart. Peace falls over me, pushing aside all my worries and fears and stress until there’s nothing left but her and the life growing inside her. My family. The reason I smile, the reason I wake up excited for the day, and the reason I’m looking forward to a future that I never even dreamed was possible.

We’re going to find Alina, and we’re going to bring her home, and then we’re killing all these fuckers and I’m never going to think about this shit again. All the things I’ve seen, everything I’ve been forced to watch is going to be replaced by memories of my beautiful wife and our growing family.

With that thought firmly in place, I bury my face against Simona’s neck and fill my lungs with her, letting her permeate every part of me so that nothing else exists but her, just the way I like it. The steady beat of her heart, a constant reminder that she’s here and safe, is the last thing I remember before I let go and join her in sleep.

THE END

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed it, and Lev’s story is coming soon!

In case you missed Roman’s story, you can get it here: Paved in Blood

In the meantime, please keep reading to get a free bonus scene of the OB/GYN visit and to find out what exactly happened in the elevator and to learn about my other dark Bratva books!

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Thank You!

I hope you enjoyed Simona and Danil's story. I can't wait to hear what you all think of it!

If you have the time, I'd be so grateful if you could leave a review. Every review helps my books get seen by more people, so even if it's just a star review, it really means the world to me!

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Paved in Blood

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Melnikov Bratva Book 1

Paved in Blood

I'll walk through hell to be with him,
Even if the path is paved in blood.

Emily:
Roman Melnikov is a deadly man in an expensive suit.
But I know what lies beneath the façade—the scars and tattoos that hint at the man he really is.

He came here to find his sister, and his search leads him to my dad and his friends.
We both want to take them down,
and the only way to do that is together.
I had no idea how dangerous it would be,
or that by the end of it, we'd all be covered in blood.
Loving Roman is dangerous,
but I can't let him go.
His path is leading him straight to hell,
and it looks like I'm coming along for the ride.

Roman:
The plan was simple:
Bring our Bratva to America.
Find the scum who took my sister.
Kill them all.
But then I met Emily, the daughter of the enemy, and I can't let her go.
She's everything I'm not—sweet, innocent, good.
Far too good for someone like me, but I can't stay away, and now she's a part of this.
Change of plans:
The only way to keep her safe is to keep her by my side…or on her knees.
To everyone else, she's my pet, the woman who belongs to me.
To me, she's everything—the woman who owns every part of me.
I will do anything to keep her safe,
and together we're going to paint this city red.

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Delicious Prey

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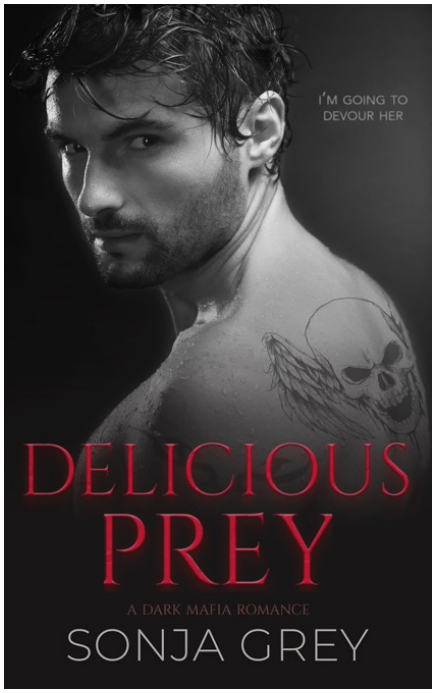
A Dark Hitman Standalone Romance



Delicious Prey

It was my testimony that put him away for life,
but now he's escaped and standing in my bedroom.

Lydia:
Kirill Chernikov is a deadly hitman for a powerful Bratva,
and it's my eyewitness testimony that puts him away for life.

He's the monster who killed my dad...at least I think he is.
The truth is I didn't see his whole face that night.
I saw a tall man with a powerful, deadly build, and one hell of a chiseled jaw.
The police convinced me it was Kirill, and he's the one I pointed out in the courtroom.
After he was sent away, I thought it was over, but it's only just begun.
Turns out he's a little, I mean a lot, obsessed with me.
He sends me letters from prison, has someone watching me at all times, and tells me I'm not allowed to date anyone.
I'm his and only his.
I should be disgusted.
I'm not.
He makes me want things I shouldn't, and when he escapes, I'm the first thing he comes for.
He makes it clear that he won't be spending another night away from me ever again.
He's a man who doesn't like to be disobeyed.
And he's decided I'm his.

Kirill:
I've spent my life building a reputation that ensures everyone fears me.
I have no attachments. No one gets close.
But all that changes when I see Lydia.
I can't get her out of my head.
I'm an obsessed man with nothing but time.
I may be in prison now, but I'll be escaping soon,
and when I do, I'm coming for her.
Once she's in my arms, I'm never letting go of my delicious prey.
I'm going to devour her piece by piece.

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Devil from Moscow

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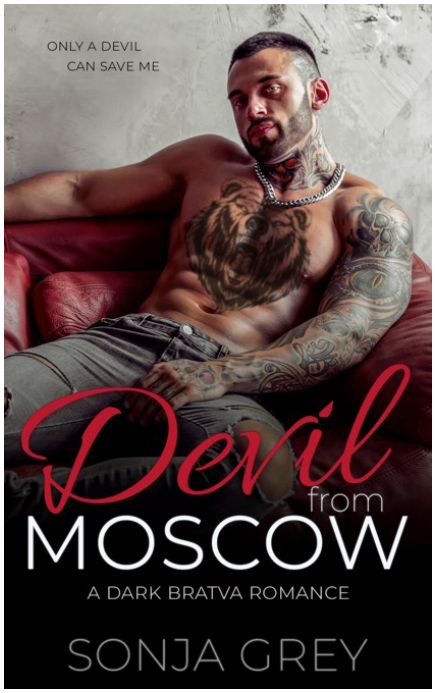
Medvedev Bratva



Devil from Moscow

I never expected to fall for a devil.

Nina:
You know the story where the hero comes in and saves the day, rescuing the heroine right in the nick of time?
This isn't that story.

Instead of a knight in shining armor, he’s a sexy, tatted-up Bratva boss with a reputation for being brutal and fierce.
Vasily finds me after I’ve already been brought to my lowest—broken by cruel men until I barely recognize myself.
He doesn’t offer me salvation.
He offers me protection and revenge.
And I gladly take it.
Because I don’t need a knight in shining armor.
I need a villain who doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty, a man who will make those bastards pay for what they did to me.
I never expected to fall for the devil with blood on his hands.
I never expected to crave the comfort of his powerful body.
But our arrangement quickly turns into something more as he teaches me what real pleasure feels like, and soon I’m addicted.

Vasily:
When I first saw her, she was broken, alone, scared.
I couldn’t leave her, so I did the only thing I could do.
I claimed her as my own and gave her the protection of my name.
She knows who I am, knows my reputation and the bloody stories they tell about me.
But she’s not the one who needs to fear me.
It’s all the men that hurt her who need to be scared.
Because I’m coming for them.
One by one I’m going to take down every single person who dared to hurt what’s mine.
Because Nina *is* mine.
She was mine the second she wrapped her arms around me and begged me for help, and I’m never letting her go.

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Bratva Devil

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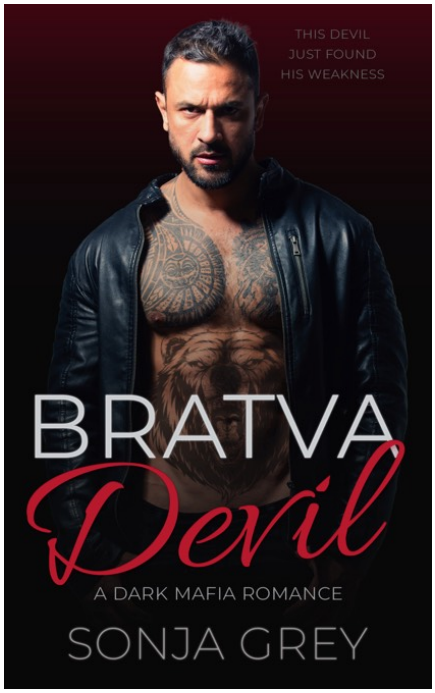
Medvedev Bratva



Bratva Devil

He loves the chase.
Turns out I love to get caught.

Maddie:
The world’s worst meet cute—I walk in on him slitting a throat.

I run like hell, but he really loves the chase…judging by my body's reaction, so do I.
He kidnaps me, thinking I'm someone else, but when he finds out the truth, I manage to convince him to hire me as his maid instead of offing my ass.
He's dangerous, deadly, and the man never cracks a smile.
He's also gorgeous, sinfully sexy, and ridiculously protective.
I shouldn't want him.
I shouldn't love the dark, raw hunger I see in his eyes.
And I definitely shouldn't taunt and tease him.
The truth is Volodya is more beast than man, and I want to see him lose control.
I want to be the one to send him to his knees.

Volodya:
As a Bratva boss, I'm not allowed to make mistakes.
But I make a big one when I kidnap the wrong damn woman.
It's not safe to let her go, so instead I take her up on her offer and hire her to work for me.
Under my watchful eye, I make sure she does what she's supposed to and upholds our agreement.
But as much as I try to keep her at arm's length, she keeps getting under my skin.
All the possessive and protective instincts that I never knew I had come out with Maddie
She likes to tease me and taunt me, trying to get me to claim her.
But she has no idea how much I enjoy the hunt, how much I enjoy seeing her squirm.
When my little *kiska* starts to run, I'm more than happy to give chase.
Because I will be claiming her, *all of her*, and when I do catch her, she's going to scream who she belongs to loud enough for the whole damn world to hear.

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Filthy Devil

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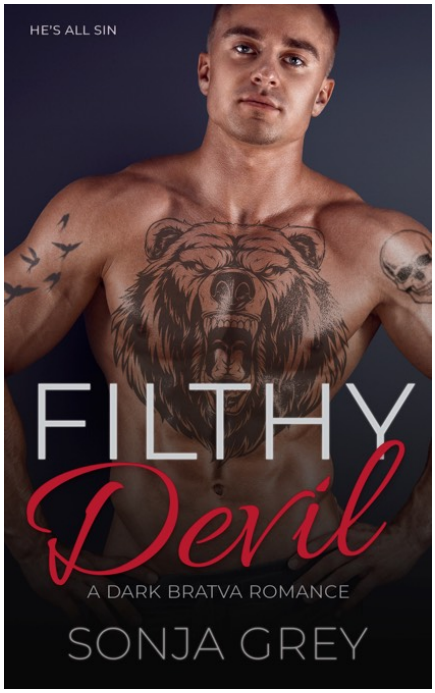
Medvedev Bratva



Filthy Devil

He may look like an angel, but he's all sin.

Evie:
An abusive father and a job as a night janitor.
Yeah, life doesn't get much better than this.

I’m convinced my future is a bleak one, but then I accidentally rear-end an Aston Martin.
The driver is the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen.
Valeri Medvedev is a man I would happily fall on my knees to worship.
I had no idea he was a dangerous Bratva boss.
All I saw was the sexy smile, the dimple in his cheek, and the body that made my mouth water.
I was blinded by him…and then I found out the truth.
He’s dangerous.
He’s a killer.
And I’m the one he wants.

Valeri:
For the first time in my life, I’m obsessed with a woman.
When Evie hit my car, she became mine.
Mine to protect.
Mine to claim.
Mine to possess.
I shouldn’t be allowed to touch something so innocent…but I will.
I’m going to lay her down and show her all the depraved things I want to do to her.
Soon she’ll be screaming my name and embracing the darkness that only I can give her.

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Caught by the Bratva Boss

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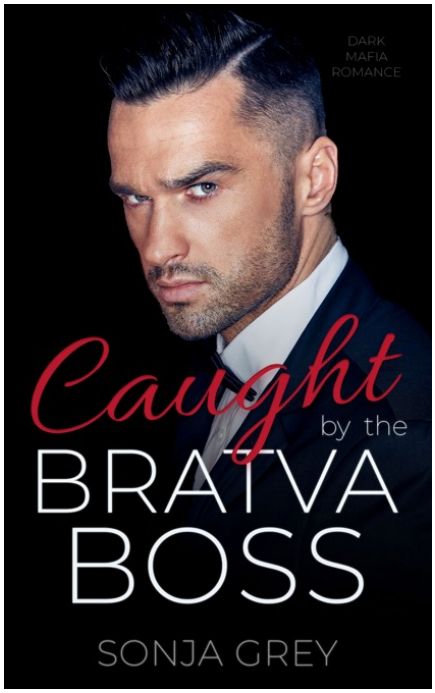
Fedorov Bratva



Caught by the Bratva Boss!

**Mikhail Fedorov is the most powerful Bratva boss in town,
and I've just broken into his house.**

Charlotte:
This was supposed to be an easy score.
In and out.

No harm, no foul.
But when Mikhail catches me red-handed and wraps those strong arms around me, telling me in his sexy accent that I picked the wrong damn house to rob, I know my goose is cooked.
I expect the police and a future behind bars,
but this Bratva boss has other plans for me.
Locked in his house with no way to escape, the tension between us builds to the breaking point.
He taunts me, pushes all my buttons, and leaves me wanting so much more.
The only question is which one of us is going to break first.

Mikhail:
No one steals from me and lives, but the beautiful thief I've just caught has me rethinking that credo.
She's a scared little rabbit before the wolf, but I can't let my sweet bunny just walk away, not after she realizes who I am and what I've done.
And especially not after I get a taste of just how sweet she really is.
No, I'm keeping her, whether she likes it or not.

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Savage Savior

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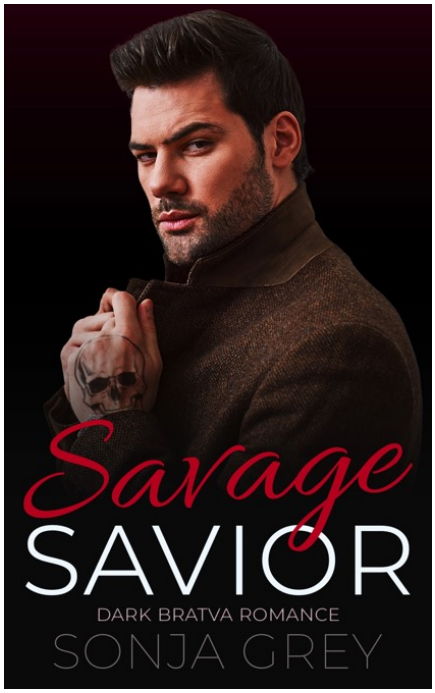
Fedorov Bratva



Savage Savior

**To everyone else he’s a killer, the man they run from in fear,
but to me, he’s the only man who’s ever made me feel safe.**

Riley:
They call him Death.
He’s a scarred, tatted-up wall of muscle,

a highly trained killer that I should be running from,
but I’m lost to Artyom from the first moment I walk into his club and meet his sexy, grey eyes.
Everything about him is dangerous, raw, primal—a barely contained savage.
And now all his focus is on me.
He knows I’m in trouble, and he promises to protect me, to free me from my brother’s quick fists and his vicious friend.
To everyone else, he’s a monster.
To me, he’s my fierce protector, the one who would do anything to keep me safe.

Artyom:
People call me Death.
It’s a nickname earned in blood and one I fully deserve.
Everything I touch turns red, but I can’t stay away from her.
She’s a pawn in her brother’s game against the Fedorov Bratva.
Too innocent to be working in my club,
too innocent for me,
but I can’t let her go.
She was mine the second I laid eyes on her.
And I’ll happily kill anyone who tries to take her from me.
Because no one touches what’s mine and lives.

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Arrogant Bratva Bastard

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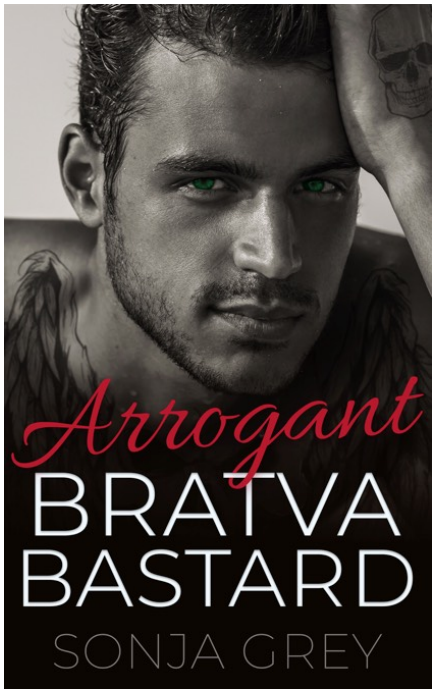
Fedorov Bratva



Arrogant Bratva Bastard

I’ve spent my life running from my family’s mafia ties.
I never expected it all to end in the arms of an arrogant Bratva bastard.

Gia:
Growing up in a mafia family taught me that I want nothing to do with it.

I washed my hands of all of them and ran off with my younger brother before they could sink their claws into him.
Years later, the Fedorov Bratva took down the Rossi mafia.
I thought that was the end of it.
But now it’s up to me to go back and take care of my uncle’s estate.
Turns out the Russians don’t want me here, and they’ve sent a masked, cocky Bratva member to watch over me until they decide whether I’m a threat or not.
Forced to his house, I resign myself to the fact that we’ll be roomies for a while.
I tell myself it’ll be easy to hate him, but the attraction between us is sizzling hot, and it’s getting harder and harder to remember why I’m supposed to keep my distance.

Yuri:
She’s the enemy, plain and simple.
When she catches me snooping around, I have no choice but to keep her with me.
Now I’m on babysitting duty—stuck being around her, watching her every second of every day.
She pushes all my buttons, but it’s not just anger I feel.
No, there’s also a good bit of lust.
All I need is just one time with her. One time and she’ll be out of my system.
Turns out one time will never be enough, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her by my side, even if that means tying her to the damn bed.

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Grumpy Bratva Hitman

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Holiday Standalone

Grumpy Bratva Hitman
Instead of a stocking full of coal,
this year my grumpy ass is getting a wife.

I hate Christmas.
I hate everything to do with the holiday.
So why am I suddenly obsessed with the Christmas-caroling, little ball of winter cheer that's found her way into my life?

She likes candy canes and hot mugs of cocoa, and I kill people for a living.
These two worlds were never meant to collide.
But all that changes when she sees me taking out my latest target.
I don’t leave witnesses—not even cute ones in reindeer-decorated, knitted caps.
Now, I’m left with a choice: take her out of the equation permanently or make her my wife and give her the protection of my name.
The last thing I’m expecting is the raw desire between the two of us or the fact that I’m falling so hard and so fast for her.
This Christmas just got a whole lot more complicated.

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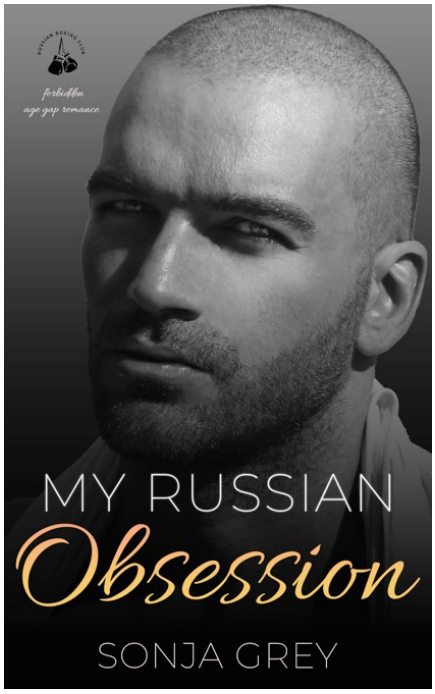
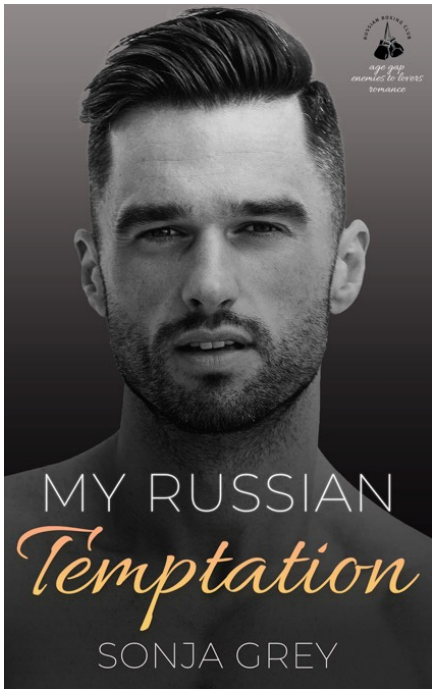
Russian Boxing Club Series

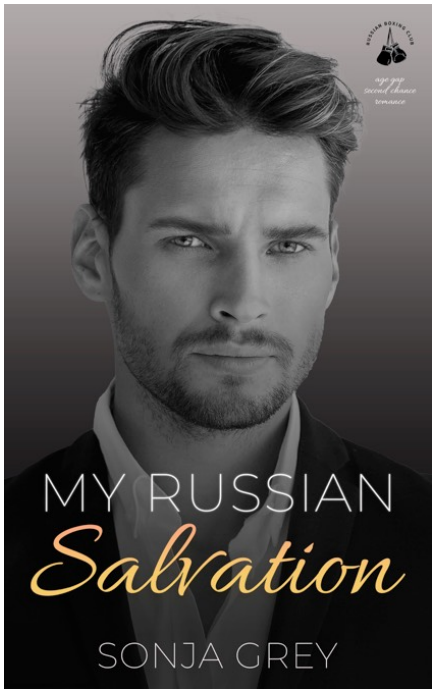
If you'd like more age gap, steamy romances, then please check out the Russian Boxing Cub series! It's an interconnected series, but they can be read in any order.



Forbidden Age Gap!
My Russian Obsession



Enemies-to-Lovers Age Gap!
My Russian Temptation



Second Chance Age Gap!

My Russian Salvation

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About the Author

Just like her last name, Sonja loves morally grey alphas with a hidden heart of gold. She loves strong men with mile-wide soft spots for the women they love and who will stop at nothing to keep them safe.

She writes mainly dark mafia steamy romances where the lines between good and bad blur into a beautiful, sexy shade of grey.

Zero cheating and HEAs are always guaranteed!

She can be reached at sonja@sonjagreyauthor.com

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